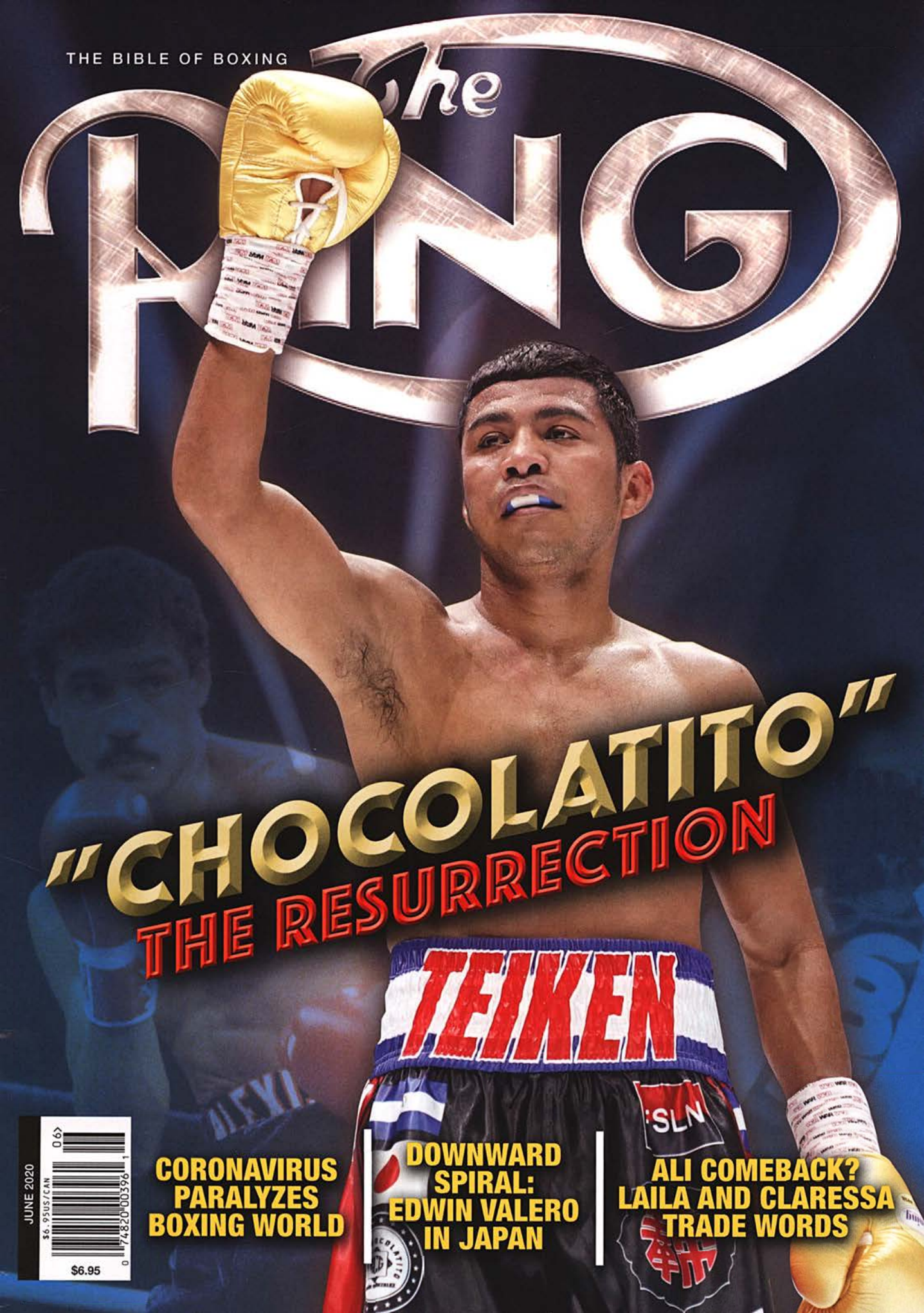
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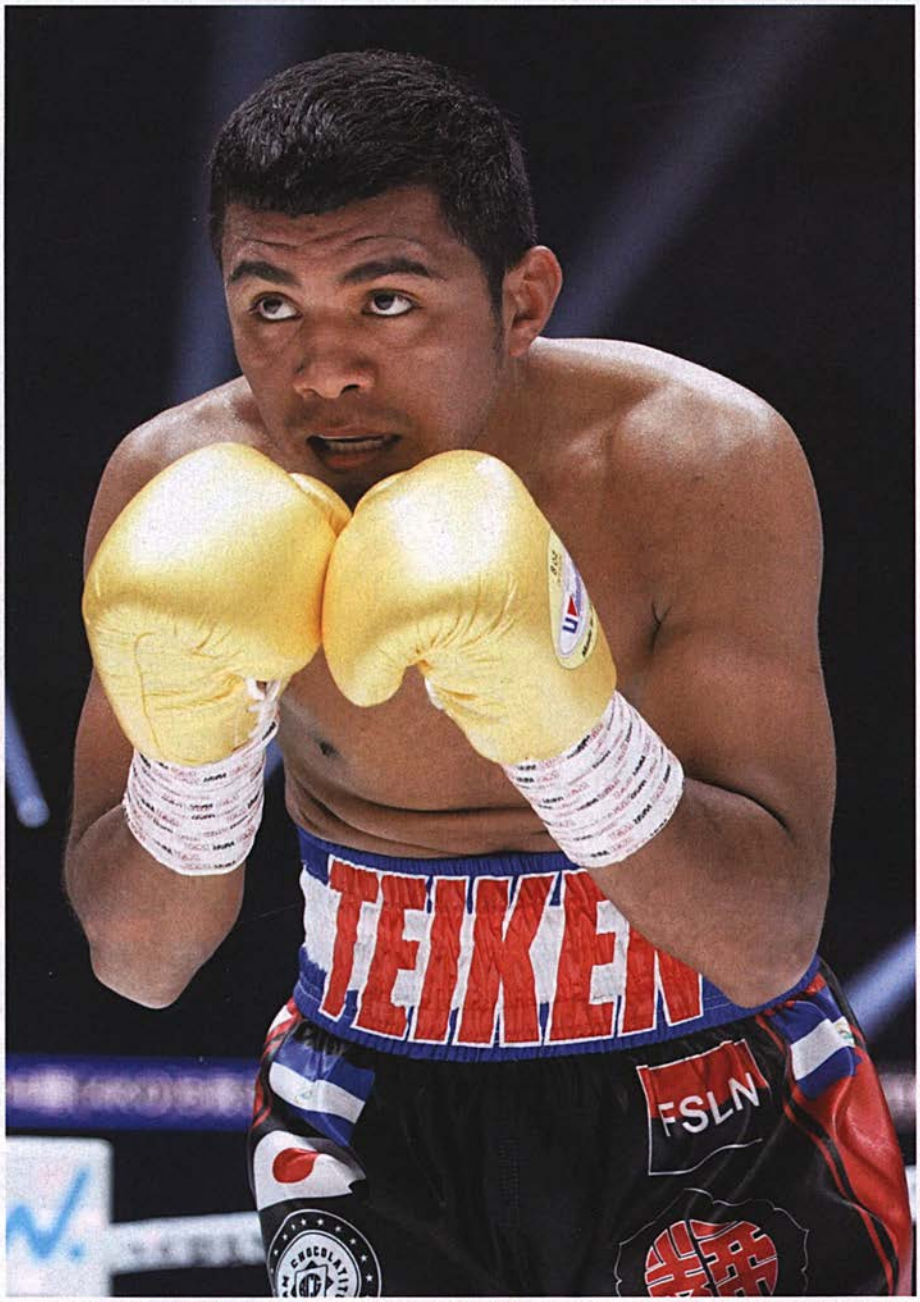

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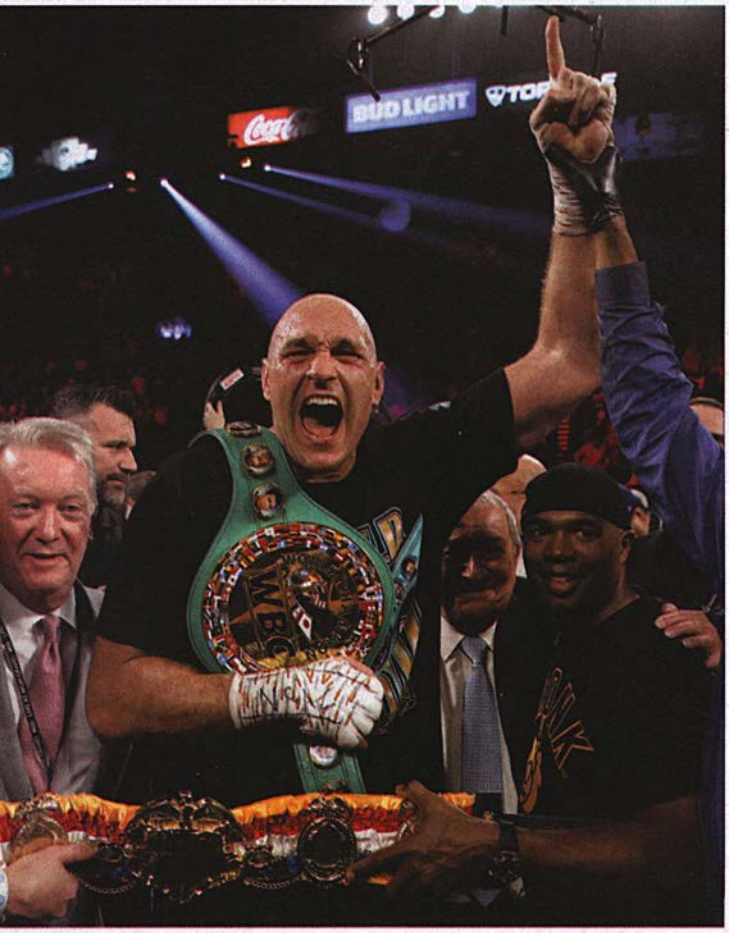
COVER PHOTO BY NAOKI FUKUDA

Mikey Garcia (right) isn't done with the welterweight division yet. The four-division titleholder rebounded from his one-sided loss to Errol Spence Jr. last March by earning a close decision over fellow veteran Jessie Vargas on February 29. Garcia scored a knockdown in Round 5.

PHOTO BY TOM PENNINGTON



STILL BUZZING OVER FURY-WILDER

Tyson Fury is the best pure boxing heavyweight since Muhammad Ali. Yes, he is that good. A man standing 6-foot-9 and weighing in excess of 270 pounds moving like a middleweight ballet dancer is not something you see every day. His fights with Deontay Wilder – who is on paper the biggest-punching heavyweight in history – proved several things. Fight one, which Fury would have won if not for the knockdowns, proved that Fury has a granite chin. The second knockdown looked like Fury had been all but decapitated, but he got up to win the rest of the round. Fight two proved that Fury is a thinking boxer who can adjust. He gained weight in the interim, kept pushing Wilder back, never let him set his feet and battered him into submission. Wilder's trainer, Mark Breland, should have thrown the towel in sooner. Unlike his namesake, it looks like Tyson Fury will keep it together and isn't surrounding himself with yes-men and other parasites. Long live the (gypsy) king.

Brad Morris
Astoria, New York

WHY RANK WHYTE AHEAD OF WILDER?

I have a question about your ratings. Why did you drop Deontay Wilder to No. 3 (below Dillian Whyte) in the heavyweight rankings following his loss to Tyson Fury? Who do you think would win a Wilder-Whyte fight?

Josiah Gampel
Valley Stream, New York

Editor's response: Your letter triggered Editor-In-Chief Doug Fischer, who went off on the following rant: What does who we think MIGHT win a head-to-head fight between Deontay Wilder and Dillian Whyte have to do with where we rank him following a one-sided loss to Tyson Fury? (And, mind you, there are more than a few fans, media members, boxing insiders and Ring Ratings Panelists who thought Whyte could beat Wilder BEFORE The Bronze Bomber got bombed out by Fury.) Fury and Wilder were The Ring's Nos. 1- and 2-rated heavyweights going into their February 22 showdown in Las Vegas. That's why the vacant Ring Magazine heavyweight title was on the line that night. When Fury won, he was elevated from his No. 1 spot to the champion position in the heavyweight rankings. I hope you didn't think we were going to elevate Wilder from No. 2 to No. 1 following his dismal performance. No, unified titleholder Anthony Joshua, who has defeated more Ring-ranked heavyweights (including Whyte) than anyone else, was promoted to the top spot under Fury. We were not going to leave Wilder at No. 2 after the way he got his narrow ass kicked around the ring for six and half rounds. He had to drop at least one spot. He's lucky his two victories over Luis Ortiz, currently No. 4, prevented him from dropping any further than No. 3. Whyte took his place at No. 2, and there's nothing wrong with that. Whyte has won 11 consecutive bouts against solid opposition (including decisions over Ring-rated Joseph Parker and Oscar Rivas) since his lone loss (vs. Joshua in 2015). However, Wilder's drop in the Ring rankings has nothing to do with Whyte's resume and everything to do with losing his last bout. Fighters usually drop in the rankings when they lose, and it seldom matters how good they are or what they've done lately. Daniel Roman was a unified titleholder at 122 pounds and The Ring's No. 1-rated junior featherweight going into his January 30 fight with Murodjon Akhmadaliev. He fought his ass off for 12 hard rounds against the talented southpaw from Uzbekistan but dropped a split decision (that some believe could have gone his way). Still, he lost. And the Ratings Panel dropped him from No. 1 to No. 4. Nobody complained about this demotion. Nobody compared Roman's resume with those of the current Nos. 1 and 2 junior featherweights, Rey Vargas and Emanuel Navarrete, and protested their being ranked ahead of him. Nobody argued who might win if Roman were to fight Vargas or Navarrete. Even those of us who thought Roman should have won or pulled out a

draw vs. Akhmadaliev accepted the demotion.

The only time the Ratings Panel will not demote a fighter coming off a loss is if that fighter lost a controversial fight that the vast majority of the public thought he won – which was the case with Gennadiy Golovkin, who retained his No. 1 middleweight ranking following his disputed split-draw and majority decision loss against Canelo Alvarez – or if that fighter came very close to beating an elite boxer while putting forth an effort so monumental that it would be WRONG to penalize him by moving him down the rankings. This was the case with Nonito Donaire's decision loss to Naoya Inoue in their epic battle that was named The Ring Magazine's 2019 Fight of the Year. Wilder wasn't robbed vs. Fury on February 22, and he didn't come close to kicking ass like Donaire did against The Monster (heck, he didn't put up a fraction of the effort that Roman did against Akhmadaliev). No. 3 is a fair ranking for Wilder.

WILDER NEEDS DIMENSIONS

Two of the greatest fights that I ever saw were Max Schmeling vs. Joe Louis 1 and 2. Schmeling studied Louis' previous fights on film and detected that, for a brief moment, Joe would drop his right hand to his side after throwing the right hand. Schmeling took advantage of this and gave Louis a thorough beating, dropping him in the fourth and then stopping him in the 13th. In my opinion, Louis took a worse beating than Deontay Wilder; Joe was still lying on the canvas when he was counted out.

Louis took a couple of tune-up fights before his rematch with Schmeling. In the rematch, Joe KO'd Schmeling in Round 1, and people sitting at ringside said you could hear Schmeling screaming out in pain. So, Wilder can repeat what the great Joe Louis did back in 1936. But unlike Louis, who just needed a few adjustments, Wilder delivers slap-like punches and I have seen him pull straight back. His trainer is the great Mark Breland, who was a champion at the amateur and pro levels; I thought Breland could free Wilder of his bad habits, but maybe Wilder felt his bad habits could be erased with his right hand.

The point I want to make is that Wilder is in the perfect position to write history if Breland can convince him to listen and work on his defense. And Wilder must also learn how to use his left hand effectively and be able to take out a man with either hand. I believe he has more talent than other top heavyweights, but Wilder must show and believe that he can knock out a man with a left hook. He cannot remain a one-punch fighter. The question now becomes whether he can add versatility to his power.

Barry Abbot
milespipa@gmail.com

MONEY TROUBLES

I found your April cover image of Floyd Mayweather Jr. insipid to say the least. Are you The Ring or are you Forbes? I could care less how much money Mayweather has. I judge a person on their character level, not their bank account. Mayweather is an all-time great. No question. He's a marvel to watch. But I would have preferred an action shot on the cover. Not this shallow portrait.

Curt Phillips
Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada

Editor's response: That's the whole point when discussing Mayweather: fighter vs. "Money," in-ring greatness vs. boardroom business choices, action shot vs. shallow portrait – separating one from the other, if it's even possible. Mayweather himself certainly cares how much money he has and definitely wants to be judged on his bank account as much as his record, if not more. He is a complex, shallow, all-time great boxer-businessman. He inspires either admiration or contempt or, in some cases, both at the same time. So we'll call that cover a success.

BEYOND THE THRILL

When some people watch boxing all they see is the thrill, but there is so much more than people see. Did you ever stop to look at the footwork of each fighter, or the backstory of each fight? When you look beyond the ring, boxing is rich with wonder. There are so many layers to each fight, every fight is unique, and that's what I love about the sport. It's unpredictable, and fast-paced, and there's no faking it. Each fighter has a story to tell, and they tell it each night they step out into that ring.

Stevie Joy Massengale, 15,
stand-up comedian and huge boxing fan
Los Angeles

Editor's response: Amen, Stevie Joy.

CORRECTIONS: *On page 20 of the May 2020 issue, Kid Galahad's opponent was mistakenly identified in the featherweight ratings update as Mark DeLuca. In reality, DeLuca fought Kell Brook on the same card and Galahad defeated Claudio Marrero of the Dominican Republic. Also, in the junior featherweight section, it was stated that Murodjon Akhmadaliev's pair of titles is "two more than any fighter from Uzbekistan has ever possessed." This should have said "one more than any fighter from Uzbekistan has ever possessed at the same time," as Akhmadaliev is the country's first* unified *titleholder. His countrymen Artur Grigorian and Ruslan Chagaev also held world titles during their careers.*

WRITE TO THE RING! Come Out Writing, The Ring, P.O. Box 90254, Brooklyn, NY 11209 comeoutwriting@gmail.com ★ Emailed letters will include a writer's email address unless a city and state of origin are provided. Letters may be edited for reasons of space and clarity.

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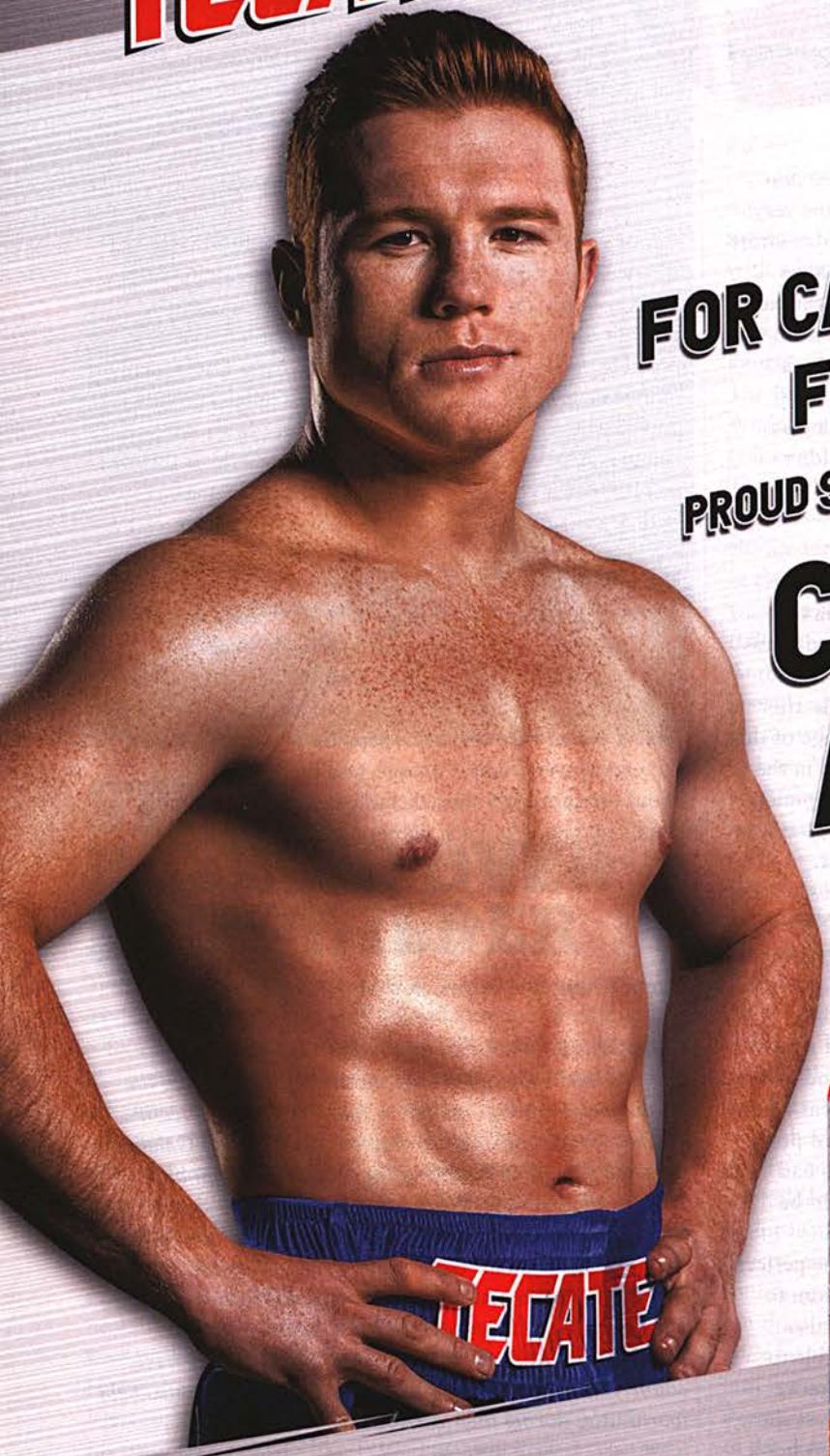

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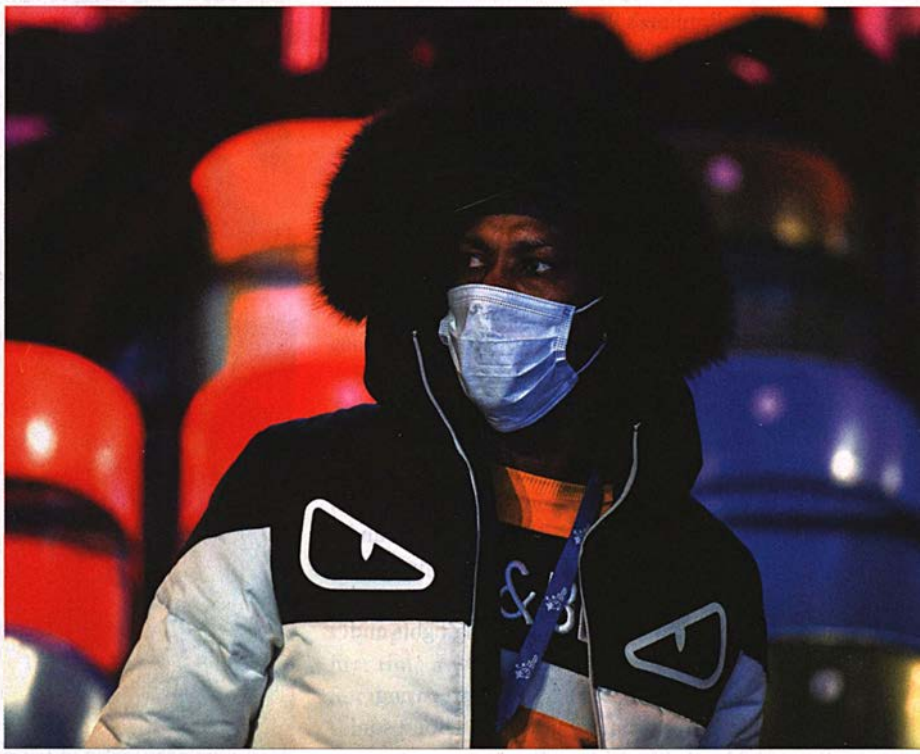
WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER



What a difference four weeks can make.

Boxing was on a high when we put out the last issue of The Ring.

Tyson Fury, who regained the Ring Magazine heavyweight championship and won the WBC title with an unforgettable stoppage of Deontay Wilder, was our cover star. His surprisingly aggressive performance capped what had been a successful co-promotion between rival promoters and network giants, which presented the pay-per-view rematch with the same level of publicity and coverage of other major sporting events, such as the NBA Finals or the Super Bowl.

The Saturday after Wilder-Fury 2, one of my favorite fighters of the past 15 years – Roman "Chocolatito" Gonzalez – turned back the clock and broke down undefeated odds favorite Kal Yafai to a ninth-round stoppage that not only earned the future Hall of Famer the WBA 115-pound title, but also the respect and admiration of hardcore fans everywhere.

COVID-19 put boxing, and much of society, on ice in March.

I was beyond elated for the cover star of this issue. All was right with the world. (I think I actually tweeted this after Gonzalez's victory.) Boxing was in a good place and there was much to look forward to.

The "Coming Up" (on Page 80) of the last issue included Mairis Briedis vs. Yuniel Dorticos (for the vacant Ring cruiserweight title on March 21), Ring 2019 Prospect of the Year Vergil Ortiz vs. Samuel Vargas (March 28), Ring No. 1-rated light heavyweight Artur Beterbiev vs. Fanlong Meng (for Beterviev's IBF/WBA titles on March 28), undefeated heavyweight up-and-comers Daniel Dubois and Joe Joyce (April 11), former 140-pound titleholders Regis Prograis and Maurice Hooker (April 17), Ring bantamweight champ Naoya Inoue vs. John Riel Casimero (for Inoue's Ring/

IBF/WBA titles and Casimero's WBO belt on April 25), Ring junior welterweight champ Josh Taylor vs. Apinun Khongsong (for Taylor's Ring/IBF/WBA titles on May 2) and The Ring's No. 1-rated junior welterweight, Jose Ramirez, vs. Viktor Postol (for Ramirez's WBC/WBO titles on May 9).

But there is no "Coming Up" at the back of this issue, and you know the reason why. Concerns over the spread of COVID-19 postponed or canceled all of the aforementioned fight cards, as well as some high-profile bouts that had yet to be put together, such as Sergey Kovalev vs. Sullivan Barrera (April 25), and two biggies that weren't formally announced but widely reported to be "done deals": Ring middleweight champ Canelo Alvarez vs. Billy Joe Saunders (for Saunders' WBO super middleweight title on May 2) and Ring lightweight champ Vasiliy Lomachenko vs. Teofimo Lopez (for Lomachenko's Ring/WBA/WBO titles and Lopez's IBF belt on May 30).

It's staggering when you think about how many major matchups the highly contagious and potentially fatal strain of coronavirus wiped off the spring schedule in just a matter of days, to say nothing of the undercards to those big fights and several smaller-venue shows.

I entered the first week of March preparing for club-level commentary gigs with Thompson Boxing (March 14), Golden Boy Promotions (March 19) and 360 Promotions (March 29), but by the end of the second week, all three shows had been canceled along with two Top Rank-promoted cards in New York City – WBO featherweight beltholder Shakur Stevenson's March 14 title defense against Miguel Marriaga and Michael Conlan's customary St. Patrick's Day headliner.

Although boxing events in China, where COVID-19 cases were first reported, had been canceled in February (including the original Ramirez-Postol date), and the Japan Boxing Commission announced that all shows in March would be postponed before the start of the month, the potential spread of the disease didn't seem like a threat to promotions in the U.S. or in Europe until those cards in California and New York were put on ice following athletic commission-enforced mandates from city and state governments.

Boxing events in every part of the world scheduled in March, April and May fell like dominos as similar governmental orders to postpone or cancel large gatherings of any kind were issued throughout the U.S. and Europe during the third week of March. The Premier Boxing Champions and World Boxing

Dubois-Joyce was one of many major fights postponed by the pandemic.

Organization announced they would suspend all business through May and June, respectively.

By the end of March, as this issue of The Ring went to press, it was clear that boxing – along with everything else – would likely be on hold through the month of June.

And that's if we're lucky. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but my wife is an epidemiologist (Google it), and from what she's told me, this is going to get a lot worse before it gets better. I don't doubt her.

Statistics that I gathered at the end of Tuesday, March 24, were 52,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the U.S. and 410,000 globally. By Thursday, those respective figures had increased to more than 82,000 (the most of any nation), and 525,000. The number of cases and deaths significantly increased by the hour.

It was no surprise when the 2020 Tokyo Olympics were pushed back to 2021, the first time a worldwide health issue knocked a Summer or Winter Games off their Olympiad schedule.

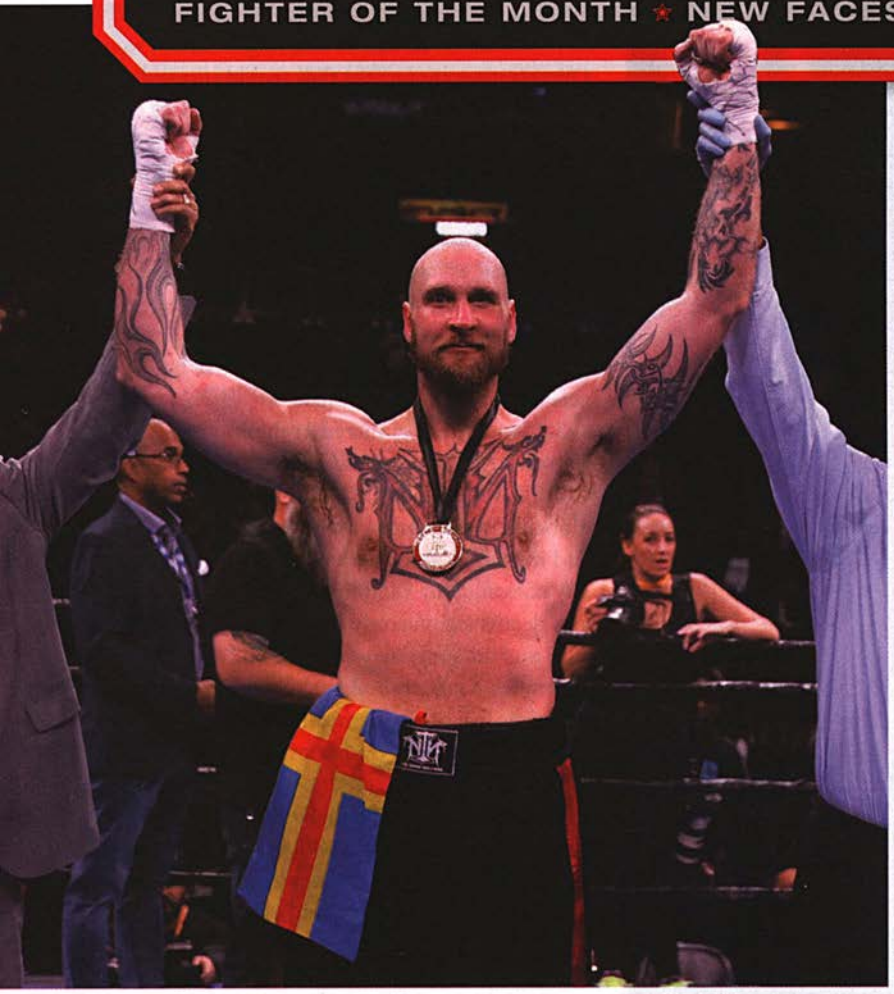
The Olympics have only been canceled during World Wars I and II, and while the Tokyo Games have yet to be kiboshed, the potential threat we face from this pandemic could eventually be just as devastating to our collective societies as those international conflicts.

Sorry to get so grim and dramatic. Let's stay positive – and indoors as much as possible. Wash your hands and disinfect surfaces frequently. Practice social distancing when you're out, but keep in mind that the global challenge we all took on in March is to stay inside.

The more we practice basic protective measures against this virus, the quicker life can get back to normal and live boxing can return. At press time, there were talks of Canelo-Golovkin 3 being set for September, Fury-Wilder 3 moving to October and a dream rematch between Chocolatito and Ring junior bantamweight champ Juan Francisco Estrada being in the works for fall or winter.

In the meantime, take advantage of the sport's rich history by checking out old fights on YouTube, engaging in friendly mythical matchup debates on social media, reading books on your favorite boxing icons and, of course, by subscribing to the print and digital editions of this fine publication.

FIGHTER OF THE MONTH



ROBERT HELENIUS

It cannot be overstated how many differences there are between the man on our cover, Roman Gonzalez, and Robert Helenius. But one thing "Chocolatito" and "The Nordic Nightmare" shared this month was the right to savor these two sweet syllables: "I'm back." The 36-year-old Helenius, a Swede by birth but a Finn by nationality, was often mentioned in conversations about potential threats to Wladimir Klitschko 10 years ago, but always after the familiar names and with a bit of skepticism, as in "... and then there's the guy from Finland." Fighting in Scandinavia and Germany, he just wasn't in the mainstream mix. He was a lurker feeding on other fringe contenders or former titleholders who'd lost their luster – in 2011, he beat Samuel Peter, Siarhei Liakhovich and Derek Chisora in succession, the first two by knockout. But he had the mystique of being undefeated and somewhat heavy-handed; the unknowns were his own chin and how he'd fare at the next level, and those questions were seemingly settled when he was knocked out by Johann Duhaupas in 2016 and again when Gerald Washington knocked him out in 2019. After that, he was just another limited heavyweight condemned to journeyman status. Thus he walked into Barclays Center in Brooklyn on March 3 as a surefire win for Adam Kownacki, an unbeaten rising star with devoted fans who always showed up to create a red-and-white Polish-themed backdrop for his fights. This was not supposed to be a step up for Kownacki; it was supposed to be a WBA-chaperoned introduction to Anthony Joshua. For the first three rounds, everything followed the script, the shorter but more effective 30-year-old pushing his way past Helenius' jab to outwork him with combos that often targeted the plodding Finn's midsection. At the end of three sessions, Helenius was looking pretty ragged. Then, just 20 seconds into the fourth, Helenius was pinned in a corner and in a bit of trouble when he scooted along the ropes and connected with a keep-away left and a short right follow-up that found the mark on Kownacki's chin just as the favorite landed a hard right cross of his own. Helenius remained standing while Kownacki tipped to a knee, which referee David Fields incorrectly called a slip. But it wouldn't matter soon enough; the damage had been done. A mere 10 seconds later, the hopes of Brooklyn would be further dashed on the canvas by a much cleaner right-left combination, and at 1:08, during the inevitable barrage of unanswered punches, Fields stepped in to end Kownacki's nightmare. Helenius is back. To do what (and when), we don't know, but it was a hell of a comeback. RING

Robert Helenius, a former heavyweight prospect who became an opponent in recent years, earned a shot at the WBA title with his upset TKO.

MICHAEL OWENS

NEW FACES

BEKTEMIR MELIKUZIEV

By **Anson Wainwright**

After only five pro bouts, Melikuziev's handlers are confident that he's ready for former world title challengers and contenders.

TOM HOGAN

In late January, Murodjon Akhmadaliev won a pair of junior featherweight titles and became the face of a highly talented generation emerging from Uzbekistan. Super middleweight prospect Bektemir Melikuziev could be next off the production line. The big-punching 23-year-old southpaw easily beat his first three opponents before stepping up against seasoned veteran Vaughn Alexander last December.

"Alexander was a great fight for me," Melikuziev (5-0, 4 knockouts) told The Ring through co-manager Alik Frolov. "I'm more experienced than he is because I had more international, high-level experience (as an amateur). The only question for me was how I would react going 10 rounds. And that's exactly why we chose him."

Shutting out Alexander over the 10-round distance while fighting with a nasty cut caused by an accidental headbutt in Round 7 could prove to be a valuable learning experience.

"Our plan was to work as nice as we could and after the fifth round start working more to try to take him out," Melikuziev explained. "I felt that I was starting to break him down, but then the headbutt happened and the cut made me step back for a little. And that's when he had his second wind. Obviously, after that I didn't go for the stoppage, even though I feel that I could. I just boxed carefully, so as not to make my cut worse."

The vicious body-puncher had been due to face former world title challenger Marco Antonio Periban on the Ryan Garcia-Francisco Fonseca undercard on February 14. However, Periban pulled out the day before, leaving Melikuziev to face Oscar Cortes, whom he easily stopped in one round.

While Melikuziev will have tougher nights ahead, it's his past that molded him into the boxer we see today.

He grew up in the small town of Shoimbek, one of four children. His father is a schoolteacher and his mother is a nurse. However, a family history of blacksmiths dates back several generations, something Melikuziev credits for his natural strength and power.

Melikuziev often fought on the streets and even beat up his older brothers. He was introduced to boxing when he was 10 years old.

"My dad always wanted one of his sons to become a boxer," he said. "He decided that I would go the athlete route. I started boxing even though we had no gym. We were training outside in the summer and winter."

As an amateur, Melikuziev estimates he had in the region of 350 fights and lost only 10. His crowning achievement was a silver medal at the 2016 Olympic Games.

He signed with manager Vadim Kornilov and the Russia-based World of Boxing promotional company. Kornilov encouraged him to move to Southern California, where other members of the Uzbekistan national team were already training with Joel Diaz.

Melikuziev turned pro on a Golden Boy Promotions show last June and soon after signed a co-promotional deal with the Los Angeles-based company.

"I have my teammates training here (in Indio, California) – Israil Madrimov, Shakhram Giyasov, Murodjon Akhmadaliev – so it was easy for me," said Melikuziev. "My goals in professional boxing are to become unified world champion in the super middleweight and light heavyweight divisions."

"Bek the Bully" has shown considerable promise and is continually improving, according to Diaz.

"He's learning, he's maturing. He still has a lot of time to learn a lot more, because at his age, all he's doing is getting better, fight after fight," said the veteran trainer. "He's a smart fighter. He knows when to attack. He knows when he's on the outside, he's in control at the distance and is always trying to create space to land the shots. He's very accurate. He is a devastating puncher because he has perfect timing.

"To reach his full potential, you need just a little bit more experience, a couple more fights, maybe three more fights. Maybe apply a little bit more volume on his offense. But as far as defense, he has great defense."

DAZN color commentator Sergio Mora likes what he's seen.

"(He's a) very hard puncher. He has that bully mentality, hence the nickname. He wants to seek and destroy every single time," the former 154-pound titleholder said after Melikuziev's most recent performance. "These Olympians from Eastern Europe, they push them really fast because they saw everything as an amateur; they faced every style."

Golden Boy matchmaker Robert Diaz is also suitably impressed by Melikuziev, who was the Uzbekistani flag-bearer at the closing ceremony of the 2016 Olympics.

"I find him fun, exciting and, most of all, explosive," said Diaz. "I know the future will be fun as he continues to grow and rise in competition. He is on a fast track due to his amateur background and talent."

Kornilov, who has successfully guided several fighters to world honors, including Melikuziev's friend Akhmadaliev, believes a title shot isn't far away.

"I think together with Golden Boy and World of Boxing, we can achieve a lot quickly," said the manager. "We have a lot of confidence in Bektemir. If everything goes to plan, we would like to move Bektemir into a world title position by next year."

Questions and/or comments can be sent to Anson at elraincoat@live.co.uk and you can follow him on Twitter @AnsonWainwright.

JABS AND STRAIGHT WRITES

BY THOMAS HAUSER

CANELO'S VIDEO CREW

For decades, it has been common for photographers and video crews to visit fighters' training camps before a big fight and shoot the action on fight night. Canelo Alvarez has made an unprecedented investment in creating a video record of his ring career. Ryan Birtcher is the point person in this effort.

Birtcher came out of the music industry and is the founder and president of Media Stranger, a highly regarded digital content strategist and production company. He began working with Alvarez prior to Canelo's 2015 fight against Miguel Cotto and, by his own admission, "had no idea what I was walking into."

The core team that Birtcher has assembled for Canelo's fights includes John Kim (a full-time editor at Media Stranger), Brendan Calder (a freelance cinematographer) and Andrew Jorgensen (a still photographer). Alternates fill in as needed from time to time.

Birtcher and his team visit Canelo's training camp several times before each fight. They're also on site for press tours, throughout fight week and on fight night. Canelo vs. Sergey Kovalev was their ninth promotion together. They've amassed thousands of hours of video content and tens of thousands of photographs. Canelo owns the copyright on the material.

"You don't just show up and shoot a video," Birtcher says of his team's work. "You have to be creative and plan. We're there for hours before and after each event – planning, shooting, editing and distributing content, all on the same day."

Some of the content is posted on Canelo's Instagram, Facebook and Twitter accounts. Is there a documentary in the works?

"We're working on a special project," Birtcher says.

Asked for his insights on Canelo, Birtcher is effusive in his praise.

"I've been blessed to be around some special people in my life," Ryan notes. "But Saul is unique. His approach to training is unlike any other athlete, musician, anyone I've known. The hard work, the dedication, his poise and total focus; they're incredible. Saul doesn't run his mouth in public. He says what he needs to say with as little controversy and drama as possible.

Canelo Alvarez's video production crew has become part of the Mexican superstar's tight-knit team over the past five years.

WOJTEK URBANEK

He's one of the smartest people I've met. He has good instincts when it comes to business and knows where to go for help.

"Saul sets the standard for professionalism for everyone on the team," Birtcher says in closing. "There's Chepo and Eddy and so many others behind the scenes who the world doesn't see. Each person on the team knows his role. Canelo values every one of them and makes them feel valued. He's generous and respectful toward everyone on the team. They're a family with intense loyalty between them. It's so special for me to be part of this."

★★★

The University of Illinois Press has published some excellent biographies of boxers in its Sport and Society series. Books about Rocky Marciano (by Russell Sullivan), Billy Conn (Andrew O'Toole) and John L. Sullivan (Michael Isenberg) come quickly to mind. *I Fight for a Living* by Louis Moore is an offering of a different kind.

In Moore's words, "*I Fight for a Living* uses the stories of black fighters' lives from 1880 to 1915 to explore how working-class black men used prizefighting and the sporting culture to assert their manhood in a country that denied their equality and to examine the reactions of the black middle class and white middle class toward these black fighters. While other works on black fighters have explored black boxers as individuals, this book seeks to study these men as a collective group."

Moore then makes what he calls "three interrelated arguments":

(1) "Prizefighting and the sporting culture provided black men a surrogate to the racist job market that had forced them into drudge labor."

(2) "Black fighters publicly performed their manhood in a myriad of ways that were understood as manly in the sporting culture and, if they chose, simultaneously conformed to acceptable hegemonic middle-class manhood."

(3) "The black pugilistic success on a national and local level shattered the myth of black inferiority."

Moore has put an enormous amount of time and effort into meticulously researching his subject. That said, many readers will find *I Fight for a Living* too academically oriented and dry for their liking. There's no dramatic writing about the fights themselves. And while it's hard to argue with points two and three above, there are times when Moore goes too far in treating boxing as just another job. Boxers aren't like other laborers. There's something intrinsically different about them. There's something in fighters that very few people have.

Still, one quote from *I Fight for a Living* stands out in my mind.

Prior to fighting James Jeffries in 1910, Jack Johnson was asked about the claim that he had a "yellow streak" that Jeffries was going to lay bare for all the world to see.

"Remember what I am going to tell you now," Johnson responded. "Men with the yellow streak in them do not work themselves up until they reach a world's championship. They stumble and fall, and the yellow splashes all over them long before they get within reaching distance of a title."

★★★

Certain punches have a treasured place in boxing lore: The right hand that crashed against Jersey Joe Walcott's jaw and made Rocky Marciano heavyweight champion of the world; Sugar Ray Robinson's picture-perfect left-hook knockout of Gene Fullmer to reclaim the middleweight throne; and the left hook from hell that Joe Frazier visited on Muhammad Ali's jaw, driving The Greatest to the canvas in Ali-Frazier I. But remember: Ali got up.

And speaking of another great fighter who got up . . . On September 28, 1979, with 50 seconds left in Round 7, Earnie Shavers landed what he later said was the hardest punch he ever threw flush on the jaw of Larry Holmes. Shavers wasn't just another puncher. With 68 knockouts on his final ring ledger, he was on the short list – the very short list – of "hardest punchers of all time."

Holmes went down like he'd been shot. Somehow, he managed to stagger to his feet at the count of seven and survive the final 40 seconds of the round. In Round 11, he knocked Shavers out. "First, you get up," Larry said later. "Then you worry about whether or not you're all right."

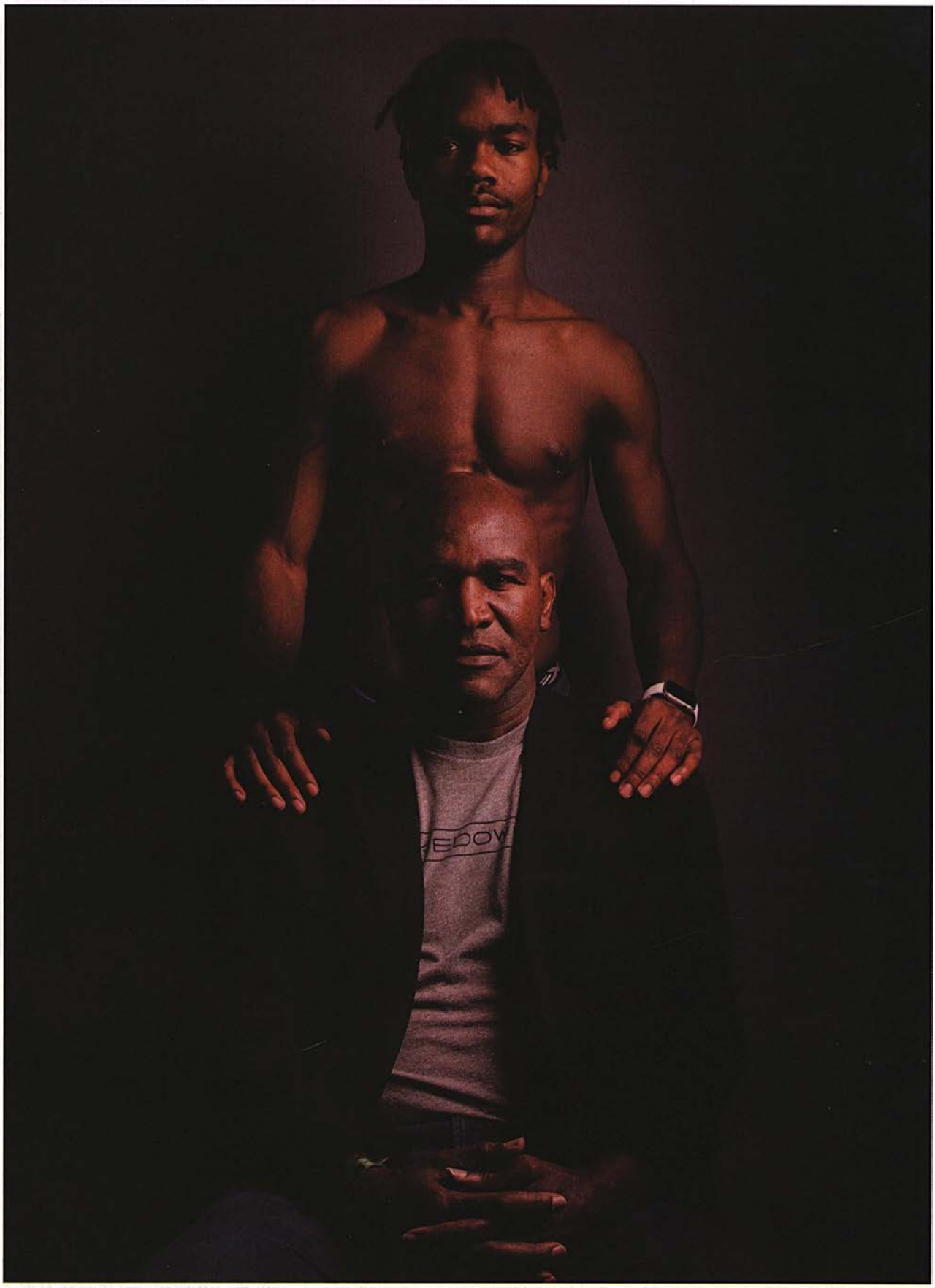
There has been talk lately about whether Deontay Wilder is the hardest punching heavyweight ever. Punching power is impossible to quantify with precision. That said, The Ring asked Holmes to compare Shavers and Wilder in terms of punching power.

"I don't know," Holmes responded. "I've never been hit by Wilder. I've only seen him on television. But I can't imagine anyone hitting harder than Earnie Shavers."

And what about those who say that Tyson Fury compares with Muhammad Ali in terms of boxing skills?

"They're crazy, man," Holmes answers. RING

Thomas Hauser's email address is thomashauserwriter@gmail.com. His most recent book – A Dangerous Journey: Another Year Inside Boxing – was published by the University of Arkansas Press. In 2004, the Boxing Writers Association of America honored him with the Nat Fleischer Award for career excellence in boxing journalism. Hauser will be inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame with the Class of 2020.



EVANDER AND EVAN HOLYFIELD

FATHER AND SON: EVANDER AND EVAN HOLYFIELD

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **WOJTEK URBANEK**
TEXT BY **THOMAS HAUSER**

Evander Holyfield has 11 children. One of them, Elijah, played college football at the University of Georgia and signed with the Philadelphia Eagles as a running back near the end of the 2019 season. Another, Evan, is pursuing a career as a professional boxer.

Evander isn't the first heavyweight champion to have a son follow him into boxing. Floyd Patterson and Leon Spinks sat ringside and watched as Tracy Harris Patterson (Floyd's adopted son) and Cory Spinks won titles at lower weights. Joe Frazier oversaw Marvis' journey through the heavyweight ranks.

Julio Cesar Chavez, Wilfredo Vazquez and Guty Espadas are "seniors" who saw their sons win belts. On occasion, the son outshines the father, as was the case with Floyd Mayweather Sr. and Jr. and the father-son pairing of Billy and Buster Douglas.

The photographs on these pages were taken in Las Vegas two days before Evan Holyfield's pro debut on the undercard of the November 2, 2019, fight between Canelo Alvarez and Sergey Kovalev.

"First, I photographed Evan," Wojtek Urbanek says. "Then Evander came over and joined us. I'd photographed him before. This time, the first thing he said was, 'Today, I'm not taking my shirt off. My body is different now.' Anyway, I asked Evander to sit on a chair like it was a throne with Evan standing behind him. Then I asked for a staredown. Evander stood up and got right into Evan's face. Evan couldn't handle it. He backed up and covered his whole face with his hands and said, 'I can't do this.' I don't think his father had ever looked at him like that before. But then Evan got in the spirit of it and we did the staredown photo. But you can see, he still didn't get too close to his father."

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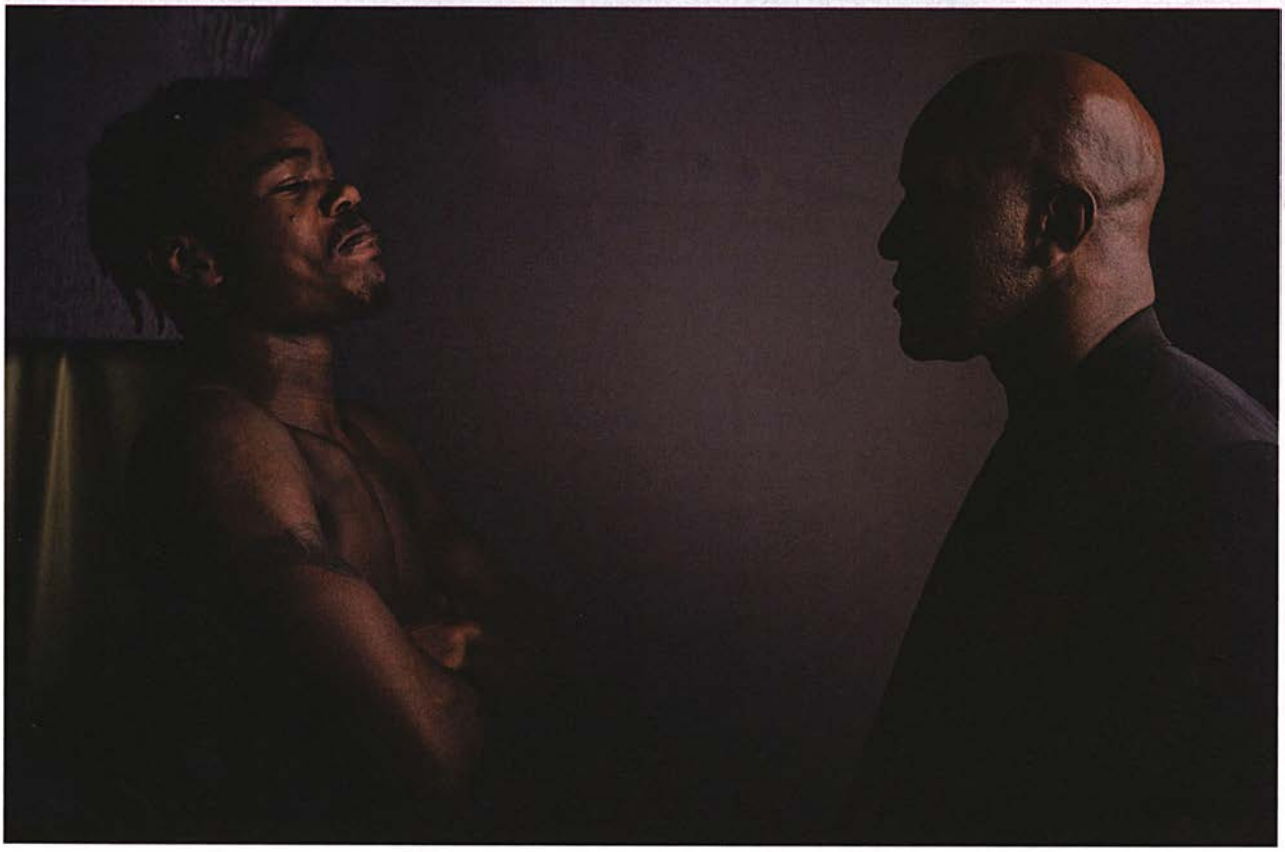

RATINGS SUMMARY

The Ring Ratings through fights of March 21, 2020

Robert Helenius (right) upset No. 9-rated heavyweight Adam Kownacki on March 3.

RECENT FIGHT RESULTS AND CHANGES IN THE RING'S DIVISIONAL RANKINGS

BY BRIAN HARTY

With boxing being the sport of extreme social undistancing, the number of fights taking place fell to near zero during this ratings period. So, rather than subject you to pages full of "no changes," here are the few divisions that did see some action before the coronavirus shutdown took hold:

HEAVYWEIGHT

Joseph Parker (No. 7) continued his rebound from back-to-back losses in 2018, outworking and stopping undersized Shawndell Winters (unrated) in the fifth round with a series of right hands that put the 39-year-old Illinois native on the other side of the ropes. Winters did OK, considering that he was facing a 28-year-old with twice as many pro fights, but Parker had little trouble shaking off the rust of an eight-month layoff caused by getting bitten by something in New Zealand, probably a spider.

The upset of the month went to 36-year-old Robert Helenius, the 10-to-1 underdog who braved the boos in Brooklyn and stopped local hero Adam Kownacki (No. 9 last month) in Round 4 after one official and one unofficial knockdown. It was a fun fight to watch, especially the second round, with the shorter and more accurate Kownacki pushing doggedly forward as the 6-foot-6 Finnish veteran thumped back at him with zero defense. A left-right combo put Kownacki down on his knee in a corner, though it was ruled a slip, and a few seconds later a clear-cut pair of

punches dropped him on his back. After that, it was a matter of Helenius teeing off until referee David Fields stepped in. It's a devastating setback for Kownacki, who was expected to rubber-stamp a title shot against a faded contender but now finds himself staring at the proverbial drawing board; he dropped out of the ratings for the time being. Helenius, who was knocked out by Gerald Washington two fights earlier, didn't break into the ratings, despite his accomplishment. The No. 10 spot went instead to Anthony Joshua's next opponent (at least at press time), Kubrat Pulev.

WELTERWEIGHT

After losing every round in his welterweight debut against Errol Spence Jr. a year ago – a challenge that can now be called ambitious to the point of absurdity – Mikey Garcia stayed the course at 147, dialed back his expectations and took on Jessie Vargas in Frisco, Texas, for fight No. 2. It was a good choice, as Garcia was able to show that not only do his exceptional talents and ring IQ still matter against bigger opponents, but also that he can still crack hard enough to put a man down, as he did with Vargas in Round 5. Vargas (unrated) started strong and threw more punches overall, but Garcia's superior accuracy resulted in more effective results and he was able to box his way to a unanimous decision. With the victory, Garcia claimed the No. 10 spot in the ratings, replacing Egidijus Kavaliauskas.

JUNIOR FEATHERWEIGHT

While not on the scale of the Helenius-Kownacki upset, literally or otherwise, TJ Doheny's loss to the obscure Ionut Baluta in Dubai was a shock nonetheless. Irish-Australian Doheny (No. 5 last month) blamed his slow start on the fight being an eight-rounder, but he was simply outworked by the unrated Romanian and dropped out of the ratings as a consequence. Undefeated Philadelphian Stephen Fulton came in at No. 10 to fill the void.

JUNIOR BANTAMWEIGHT

Cover star Roman Gonzalez's triumphant return to titleholdership, a brilliant ninth-round stoppage of Khalid Yafai covered elsewhere in this issue, lifted "Chocolatito" from No. 6 to No. 2 in the ratings while Yafai slipped from No. 4 to No. 6. One Ratings Panel member gushed, "I'm British and have nothing against Yafai but couldn't be happier that Chocolatito is king again." Others, while also happy to see such a beloved fighter succeed, resisted the temptation to go overboard: "Still trying to figure out if Roman Gonzalez is fully back or if Kal Yafai's strategy was as dumb as it looked," said one panelist. "Gonzalez had accuracy and brains for sure, but I did not see that extra sauce he will need against the elite."

No. 3-rated flyweight Julio Cesar Martinez (left) waged war with Jay Harris.

FLYWEIGHT

Julio Cesar Martinez held his position at No. 3 after defending his WBC belt against unrated Welshman Jay Harris, who made a valiant effort and suffered no real damage to his reputation, though he did take a knee in the 10th round and lost for the first time in his pro career. The Mexican titleholder's power and unmerciful body-punching made the difference on the scorecards, all three of which went in his favor, but the fact that they even came into play is a credit to Harris' quality as a fighter.

No. 10-rated junior flyweight Agustin Gauto and No. 2-rated strawweight Knockout CP Freshmart also notched a pair of wins over unthreatening opponents, scoring a second-round knockout and a shutout decision, respectively.

Like many of us sequestered in our homes, the Ratings Panel took advantage of the downtime to do some housekeeping. At super middleweight, Avni Yildirim (No. 9) was removed for inactivity – he hasn't fought since February 2019 and was injured while training to fight David Benavidez – and Daniel Jacobs came in at No. 10. Carl Frampton is now fighting at 130 pounds, so he was dropped from the featherweight rankings (No. 3) and Miguel Marriaga was drafted at No. 10. No. 7-rated 118-pounder Carlos Cuadras was moved down to the No. 9 spot at 115, where he is rumored to be on deck to face division champ Juan Francisco Estrada. Cuadras' departure at bantamweight made room for Oscar Negrete at No. 10. Also at junior bantamweight, Donnie Nietes (No. 4) was removed for 15 months of inactivity, Alejandro Barrios (No. 10) left to fight at bantamweight and Joshua Franco moved in at No. 10 to square everything up.

Pictured left to right: Shane Mosley Jr., Fernando "El Feroz" Vargas, Diego Magdaleno

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RATINGS

The Ring Ratings through fights of March 21, 2020

At press time, pound-for-pound-rated Alexandr Usyk (left) was still scheduled to face heavyweight gatekeeper Derek Chisora on May 23.

1 **CANELO ALVAREZ**
Mexico • 53-1-2 (36 KOs)

2 **VASILIY LOMACHENKO**
Ukraine • 14-1-0 (10 KOs)

3 **NAOYA INOUE**
Japan • 19-0-0 (16 KOs)

4 **TERENCE CRAWFORD**
U.S. • 36-0-0 (27 KOs)

5 **ALEKSANDR USYK**
Ukraine • 17-0-0 (13 KOs)

6 **ERROL SPENCE JR.**
U.S. • 26-0-0 (21 KOs)

7 **GENNADIY GOLOVKIN**
Kazakhstan • 40-1-1 (35 KOs)

8 **JUAN FRANCISCO ESTRADA**
Mexico • 40-3-0 (27 KOs)

9 **ARTUR BETERBIEV**
Russia • 15-0-0 (15 KOs)

10 **MANNY PACQUIAO**
Philippines • 62-7-2 (39 KOs)

HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT UNLIMITED

C **TYSON FURY** RING, WBC
U.K. • 30-0-1 (21 KOs)

1 **ANTHONY JOSHUA** IBF, WBA, WBO
U.K. • 23-1-0 (21 KOs)

2 **DILLIAN WHYTE**
U.K. • 27-1-0 (18 KOs)

3 **DEONTAY WILDER**
U.S. • 42-1-1 (41 KOs)

4 **LUIS ORTIZ**
Cuba • 31-2-0 (26 KOs)

5 **ANDY RUIZ JR.**
U.S. • 33-2-0 (22 KOs)

6 **ALEXANDER POVETKIN**
Russia • 35-2-1 (24 KOs)

7 **JOSEPH PARKER**
New Zealand • 27-2-0 (21 KOs)

8 **MICHAEL HUNTER**
U.S. • 18-1-1 (12 KOs)

9 **OSCAR RIVAS**
Colombia • 26-1-0 (18 KOs)

10 **KUBRAT PULEV**
Bulgaria • 28-1-0 (14 KOs)

CRUISERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 200 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**

1 **MAIRIS BRIEDIS**
Latvia • 26-1-0 (19 KOs)

2 **YUNIEL DORTICOS** IBF
Cuba • 24-1-0 (22 KOs)

3 **ILUNGA MAKABU** WBC
Congo • 27-2-0 (24 KOs)

4 **KRZYSZTOF GLOWACKI**
Poland • 31-2-0 (19 KOs)

5 **KEVIN LERENA**
S. Africa • 25-1-0 (12 KOs)

6 **ANDREW TABITI**
U.S. • 17-1-0 (13 KOs)

7 **LAWRENCE OKOLIE**
U.K. • 14-0-0 (11 KOs)

8 **ARSEN GOULAMIRIAN** WBA
France • 26-0-0 (18 KOs)

9 **THABISO MCHUNU**
S. Africa • 22-5-0 (13 KOs)

10 **MICHAL CIESLAK**
Poland • 19-1-0 (13 KOs)

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 175 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**

1 **ARTUR BETERBIEV** IBF, WBC
Russia • 15-0-0 (15 KOs)

2 **OLEKSANDR GVOZDYK**
Ukraine • 17-1-0 (14 KOs)

3 **DMITRY BIVOL** WBA
Russia • 17-0-0 (11 KOs)

4 **SERGEY KOVALEV**
Russia • 34-4-1 (29 KOs)

5 **ELEIDER ALVAREZ**
Colombia • 25-1-0 (13 KOs)

6 **JEAN PASCAL**
Canada • 35-6-1 (20 KOs)

7 **BADOU JACK**
Sweden • 22-3-3 (13 KOs)

8 **MARCUS BROWNE**
U.S. • 23-1-0 (16 KOs)

9 **JOE SMITH JR.**
U.S. • 25-3-0 (20 KOs)

10 **DOMINIC BOESEL**
Germany • 30-1-0 (12 KOs)

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 POUNDS

C **CALLUM SMITH** RING, WBA
U.K. • 27-0-0 (19 KOs)

1 **DAVID BENAVIDEZ** WBC
U.S. • 22-0-0 (19 KOs)

2 **CALEB PLANT** IBF
U.S. • 20-0-0 (12 KOs)

3 **ANTHONY DIRRELL**
U.S. • 33-2-1 (24 KOs)

4 **CANELO ALVAREZ**
Mexico • 53-1-2 (36 KOs)

5 **BILLY JOE SAUNDERS** WBO
U.K. • 29-0-0 (14 KOs)

6 **CALEB TRUAX**
U.S. • 31-4-2 (19 KOs)

7 **JOHN RYDER**
U.K. • 28-5-0 (16 KOs)

8 **FEDOR CHUDINOV**
Russia • 22-2-0 (15 KOs)

9 **DAVID LEMIEUX**
Canada • 41-4-0 (34 KOs)

10 **DANIEL JACOBS**
U.S. • 36-3-0 (30 KOs)

ANDREW REDINGTON/GETTY IMAGES

RATINGS

Through fights of March 21, 2020

MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 POUNDS

- **C** **CANELO ALVAREZ** RING, WBA
  Mexico • 53-1-2 (36 KOs)
- **1** **GENNADIY GOLOVKIN** IBF
  Kaz. • 40-1-1 (35 KOs)
- **2** **DEMETRIUS ANDRADE** WBO
  U.S. • 29-0-0 (18 KOs)
- **3** **JERMALL CHARLO** WBC
  U.S. • 30-0-0 (22 KOs)
- **4** **SERGIY DEREVYANCHENKO**
  Ukraine • 13-2-0 (10 KOs)
- **5** **RYOTA MURATA**
  Japan • 16-2-0 (13 KOs)
- **6** **KAMIL SZEREMETA**
  Poland • 21-0-0 (5 KOs)
- **7** **CHRIS EUBANK JR.**
  U.K. • 29-2-0 (22 KOs)
- **8** **MACIEJ SULECKI**
  Poland • 28-2-0 (11 KOs)
- **9** **ROB BRANT**
  U.S. • 25-2-0 (17 KOs)
- **10** **LIAM WILLIAMS**
  U.K. • 22-2-1 (17 KOs)

JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 POUNDS

- **C** **(VACANT)**
- **1** **JERMELL CHARLO** WBC
  U.S. • 33-1-0 (17 KOs)
- **2** **JEISON ROSARIO** IBF, WBA
  Dom. Rep. • 20-1-1 (14 KOs)
- **3** **JULIAN WILLIAMS**
  U.S. • 27-2-1 (16 KOs)
- **4** **JARRETT HURD**
  U.S. • 24-1-0 (16 KOs)
- **5** **ERISLANDY LARA**
  Cuba • 26-3-3 (15 KOs)
- **6** **BRIAN CASTANO**
  Argentina • 16-0-1 (12 KOs)
- **7** **TONY HARRISON**
  U.S. • 28-3-0 (21 KOs)
- **8** **MICHEL SORO**
  France • 35-2-1 (24 KOs)
- **9** **ERICKSON LUBIN**
  U.S. • 22-1-0 (16 KOs)
- **10** **PATRICK TEIXEIRA** WBO
  Brazil • 31-1-0 (22 KOs)

WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 POUNDS

- **C** **(VACANT)**
- **1** **ERROL SPENCE JR.** IBF, WBC
  U.S. • 26-0-0 (21 KOs)
- **2** **TERENCE CRAWFORD** WBO
  U.S. • 36-0-0 (27 KOs)
- **3** **MANNY PACQUIAO** WBA
  Phil. • 62-7-2 (39 KOs)
- **4** **KEITH THURMAN**
  U.S. • 29-1-0 (22 KOs)
- **5** **SHAWN PORTER**
  U.S. • 30-3-1 (17 KOs)
- **6** **DANNY GARCIA**
  U.S. • 36-2-0 (21 KOs)
- **7** **YORDENIS UGAS**
  Cuba • 25-4-0 (12 KOs)
- **8** **KUDRATILLO ABDUKAKHOROV**
  Uzbekistan • 17-0-0 (9 KOs)
- **9** **SERGEY LIPINETS**
  Russia • 16-1-0 (12 KOs)
- **10** **MIKEY GARCIA**
  U.S. • 40-1-0 (30 KOs)

JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 POUNDS

- **C** **JOSH TAYLOR** RING, IBF, WBA
  U.K. • 16-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **1** **JOSE RAMIREZ** WBC, WBO
  U.S. • 25-0-0 (17 KOs)
- **2** **REGIS PROGRAIS**
  U.S. • 24-1-0 (20 KOs)
- **3** **IVAN BARANCHYK**
  Russia • 20-1-0 (13 KOs)
- **4** **VIKTOR POSTOL**
  Ukraine • 31-2-0 (12 KOs)
- **5** **KIRYL RELIKH**
  Belarus • 23-3-0 (19 KOs)
- **6** **MAURICE HOOKER**
  U.S. • 27-1-3 (18 KOs)
- **7** **JOSE ZEPEDA**
  U.S. • 31-2-0 (25 KOs)
- **8** **MARIO BARRIOS**
  U.S. • 25-0-0 (16 KOs)
- **9** **ARNOLD BARBOZA**
  U.S. • 23-0-0 (10 KOs)
- **10** **BATYRZHAN JUKEMBAYEV**
  Kazakhstan • 18-0-0 (14 KOs)

No. 7-rated heavyweight Joseph Parker (left) overwhelmed Shawndell Winters in five rounds.

Mikey Garcia (right) cracked the welterweight rankings with a unanimous decision over Jessie Vargas.

LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 POUNDS

- **C** **VASILIY LOMACHENKO** RING, WBA, WBO
  Ukraine • 14-1-0 (10 KOs)
- **1** **TEOFIMO LOPEZ** IBF
  U.S. • 15-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **2** **DEVIN HANEY**
  U.S. • 24-0-0 (15 KOs)
- **3** **RICHARD COMMEY**
  Ghana • 29-3-0 (26 KOs)
- **4** **LUKE CAMPBELL**
  U.K. • 20-3-0 (16 KOs)
- **5** **RYAN GARCIA**
  U.S. • 20-0-0 (17 KOs)
- **6** **ROBERT EASTER**
  U.S. • 22-1-1 (14 KOs)
- **7** **JAVIER FORTUNA**
  Dom. Rep. • 35-2-1 (24 KOs)
- **8** **JORGE LINARES**
  Venezuela • 47-5-0 (29 KOs)
- **9** **EMMANUEL TAGOE**
  Ghana • 31-1-0 (15 KOs)
- **10** **RANCES BARTHELEMY**
  Cuba • 27-1-1 (14 KOs)

JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 POUNDS

- **C** **(VACANT)**
- **1** **MIGUEL BERCHELT** WBC
  Mexico • 37-1-0 (33 KOs)
- **2** **JOSEPH DIAZ JR.** IBF
  U.S. • 31-1-0 (15 KOs)
- **3** **JAMEL HERRING** WBO
  U.S. • 21-2-0 (10 KOs)
- **4** **TEVIN FARMER**
  U.S. • 30-5-1 (6 KOs)
- **5** **RENE ALVARADO**
  Nicaragua • 32-8-0 (21 KOs)
- **6** **MASAYUKI ITO**
  Japan • 26-2-1 (14 KOs)
- **7** **ANDREW CANCIO**
  U.S. • 21-5-2 (16 KOs)
- **8** **MIGUEL ROMAN**
  Mexico • 62-13-0 (47 KOs)
- **9** **SHAVKATDZHON RAKHIMOV**
  Russia • 15-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **10** **CHRIS COLBERT**
  U.S. • 14-0-0 (5 KOs)

FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 POUNDS

- **C** **(VACANT)**
- **1** **JOSH WARRINGTON** IBF
  U.K. • 30-0-0 (7 KOs)
- **2** **GARY RUSSELL JR.** WBC
  U.S. • 31-1-0 (18 KOs)
- **3** **XU CAN** WBA
  China • 18-2-0 (3 KOs)
- **4** **SHAKUR STEVENSON** WBO
  U.S. • 13-0-0 (7 KOs)
- **5** **KID GALAHAD**
  U.K. • 27-1-0 (16 KOs)
- **6** **MARK MAGSAYO**
  Phil. • 20-0-0 (14 KOs)
- **7** **TUGSTSOGT NYAMBAYAR**
  Mongolia • 11-1-0 (9 KOs)
- **8** **RUBEN VILLA**
  U.S. • 18-0-0 (5 KOs)
- **9** **JESSIE MAGDALENO**
  U.S. • 27-1-0 (18 KOs)
- **10** **MIGUEL MARRIAGA**
  Colombia • 29-3-0 (25 KOs)

JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 POUNDS

- **C** **(VACANT)**
- **1** **REY VARGAS** WBC
  Mexico • 34-0-0 (22 KOs)
- **2** **EMANUEL NAVARRETE** WBO
  Mexico • 31-1-0 (27 KOs)
- **3** **MURODJON AKHMADALIEV** IBF, WBA
  Uzbekistan • 8-0-0 (6 KOs)
- **4** **DANIEL ROMAN**
  U.S. • 27-3-1 (10 KOs)
- **5** **RYOSUKE IWASA**
  Japan • 27-3-0 (17 KOs)
- **6** **BRANDON FIGUEROA**
  U.S. • 20-0-1 (15 KOs)
- **7** **TOMOKI KAMEDA**
  Japan • 36-3-0 (20 KOs)
- **8** **HIROAKI TESHIGAWARA**
  Japan • 21-2-2 (14 KOs)
- **9** **AZAT HOVHANNISYAN**
  Armenia • 18-3-0 (15 KOs)
- **10** **STEPHEN FULTON**
  U.S. • 18-0-0 (8 KOs)

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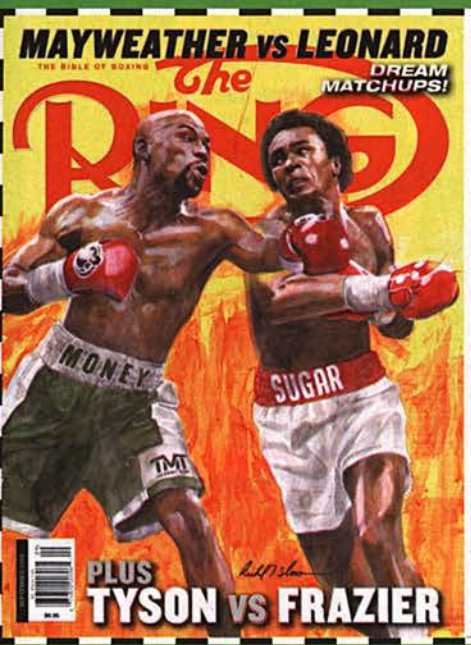

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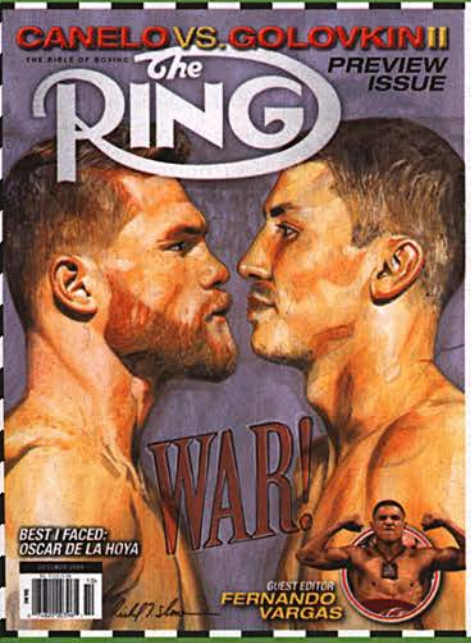

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RATINGS

Through fights of March 21, 2020

BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 POUNDS

- **C** **NAOYA INOUE** RING, IBF, WBA
  Japan • 19-0-0 (16 KOs)
- **1** **NONITO DONAIRE**
  Phil. • 40-6-0 (26 KOs)
- **2** **NORDINE OUBAALI** WBC
  France • 17-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **3** **JOHN RIEL CASIMERO** WBO
  Philippines • 29-4–0 (20 KOs)
- **4** **EMMANUEL RODRIGUEZ**
  P.R. • 19-1-0 (12 KOs)
- **5** **ZOLANI TETE**
  S. Africa • 28-4-0 (21 KOs)
- **6** **JASON MOLONEY**
  Australia • 20-1-0 (17 KOs)
- **7** **JOSHUA GREER**
  U.S. • 22-1-1 (12 KOs)
- **8** **TAKUMA INOUE**
  Japan • 13-1-0 (3 KOs)
- **9** **GUILLERMO RIGONDEAUX**
  Cuba • 20-1-0 (13 KOs)
- **10** **OSCAR NEGRETE**
  U.S. • 19-2-2 (7 KOs)

JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 POUNDS

- **C** **JUAN FRANCISCO ESTRADA** RING, WBC
  Mexico • 40-3-0 (27 KOs)
- **1** **SRISAKET SOR RUNGVISAI**
  Thailand • 47-5-1 (41 KOs)
- **2** **ROMAN GONZALEZ** WBA
  Nicaragua • 49-2-0 (41 KOs)
- **3** **KAZUTO IOKA** WBO
  Japan • 25-2-0 (14 KOs)
- **4** **JERWIN ANCAJAS** IBF
  Phil. • 32-1-2 (22 KOs)
- **5** **KHALID YAFAI**
  U.K. • 26-1-0 (15 KOs)
- **6** **ANDREW MOLONEY**
  Australia • 21-0-0 (14 KOs)
- **7** **FRANCISCO RODRIGUEZ JR.**
  Mexico • 33-4-1 (24 KOs)
- **8** **JEYVIER CINTRON**
  P.R. • 11-1-0 (5 KOs)
- **9** **CARLOS CUADRAS**
  Mexico • 39-3-1 (27 KOs)
- **10** **JOSHUA FRANCO**
  U.S. • 16-1-2 (8 KOs)

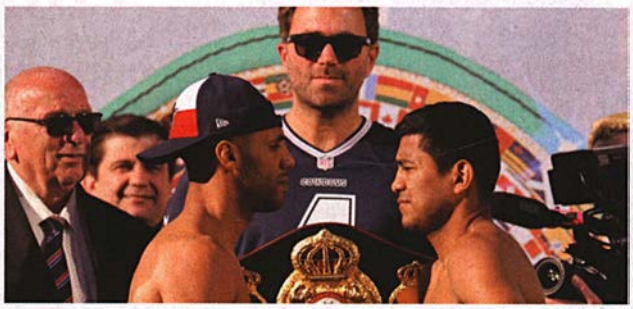
FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 POUNDS

- **C** **(VACANT)**
- **1** **KOSEI TANAKA**
  Japan • 15-0-0 (9 KOs)
- **2** **MORUTI MTHALANE** IBF
  S. Africa • 39-2-0 (26 KOs)
- **3** **JULIO CESAR MARTINEZ** WBC
  Mexico • 16-1-0 (12 KOs)
- **4** **ARTEM DALAKIAN** WBA
  Ukraine • 20-0-0 (14 KOs)
- **5** **CHARLIE EDWARDS**
  U.K. • 15-1-0 (6 KOs)
- **6** **ANDREW SELBY**
  U.K. • 13-1-0 (7 KOs)
- **7** **MASAYUKI KURODA**
  Japan • 30-8-3 (16 KOs)
- **8** **JUNTO NAKATANI**
  Japan • 20-0-0 (15 KOs)
- **9** **CRISTOFER ROSALES**
  Nicaragua • 29-5-0 (20 KOs)
- **10** **GIEMEL MAGRAMO**
  Phil. • 24-1-0 (20 KOs)

JR. FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 POUNDS

- **C** **HIROTO KYOGUCHI** RING, WBA
  Japan • 14-0-0 (9 KOs)
- **1** **KENSHIRO TERAJI** WBC
  Japan • 17-0-0 (10 KOs)
- **2** **HEKKIE BUDLER**
  S. Africa • 32-4-0 (10 KOs)
- **3** **CARLOS CANIZALES**
  Venezuela • 22-0-1 (17 KOs)
- **4** **FELIX ALVARADO** IBF
  Nicaragua • 35-2-0 (30 KOs)
- **5** **ELWIN SOTO** WBO
  Mexico • 17-1-0 (12 KOs)
- **6** **TETSUYA HISADA**
  Japan • 34-10-2 (20 KOs)
- **7** **EDWARD HENO**
  Phil. • 14-1-5 (5 KOs)
- **8** **SHO KIMURA**
  Japan • 19-3-2 (12 KOs)
- **9** **DANIEL MATELLON**
  Cuba • 11-0-2 (6 KOs)
- **10** **AGUSTIN GAUTO**
  Argentina • 15-0-0 (10 KOs)

Stephen Fulton (left) entered the 122-pound rankings with a unanimous decision over Arnold Khegai.



Khalid Yafai (left) dropped in the junior bantamweight rankings after being stopped by Roman Gonzalez.

STRAWWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 POUNDS

- **C** **(VACANT)**
- **1** **WANHENG MENAYOTHIN** WBC
  Thailand • 54-0-0 (18 KOs)
- **2** **KNOCKOUT CP FRESHMART** WBA
  Thailand • 21-0-0 (7 KOs)
- **3** **WILFREDO MENDEZ** WBO
  Puerto Rico • 16-1-0 (6 KOs)
- **4** **BYRON ROJAS**
  Nicaragua • 27-4-3 (11 KOs)
- **5** **VIC SALUDAR**
  Phil. • 20-4-0 (11 KOs)
- **6** **JOSE ARGUMEDO**
  Mexico • 23-4-1 (14 KOs)
- **7** **SIMPIWE KONKCO**
  S. Africa • 19-6-0 (7 KOs)
- **8** **PEDRO TADURAN** IBF
  Phil. • 14-2-1 (11 KOs)
- **9** **DANIEL VALLADARES**
  Mexico • 22-1-1 (13 KOs)
- **10** **MELVIN JERUSALEM**
  Phil. • 15-2-0 (9 KOs)

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RECORDS PROVIDED BY BOXREC.COM

Championship vacancies can be filled in the following two ways: 1. The Ring's Nos. 1 and 2 contenders fight one another. 2. If the Nos. 1 and 2 contenders choose not to fight one another and No. 1 fights No. 3, that matchup could be for the Ring title if the Editorial Board deems No. 3 worthy.

A champion can lose his belt in six situations: 1. The Champion loses a fight in the weight class in which he is champion; 2. The Champion moves to another weight class; 3. The Champion does not schedule a fight in any weight class for 18 months, although injuries and certain other unforeseen circumstances could be taken into consideration; 4. The Champion does not schedule a fight at his championship weight for 18 months (even if he fights at another weight); 5. The Champion does not schedule a fight with a Top-5 contender from any weight class for two years; 6. The Champion retires.

The Ring Editorial Board considers input from the Ratings Panel of boxing journalists from around the world and then decides collectively what changes will be made. That applies to both the pound-for-pound and divisional ratings.

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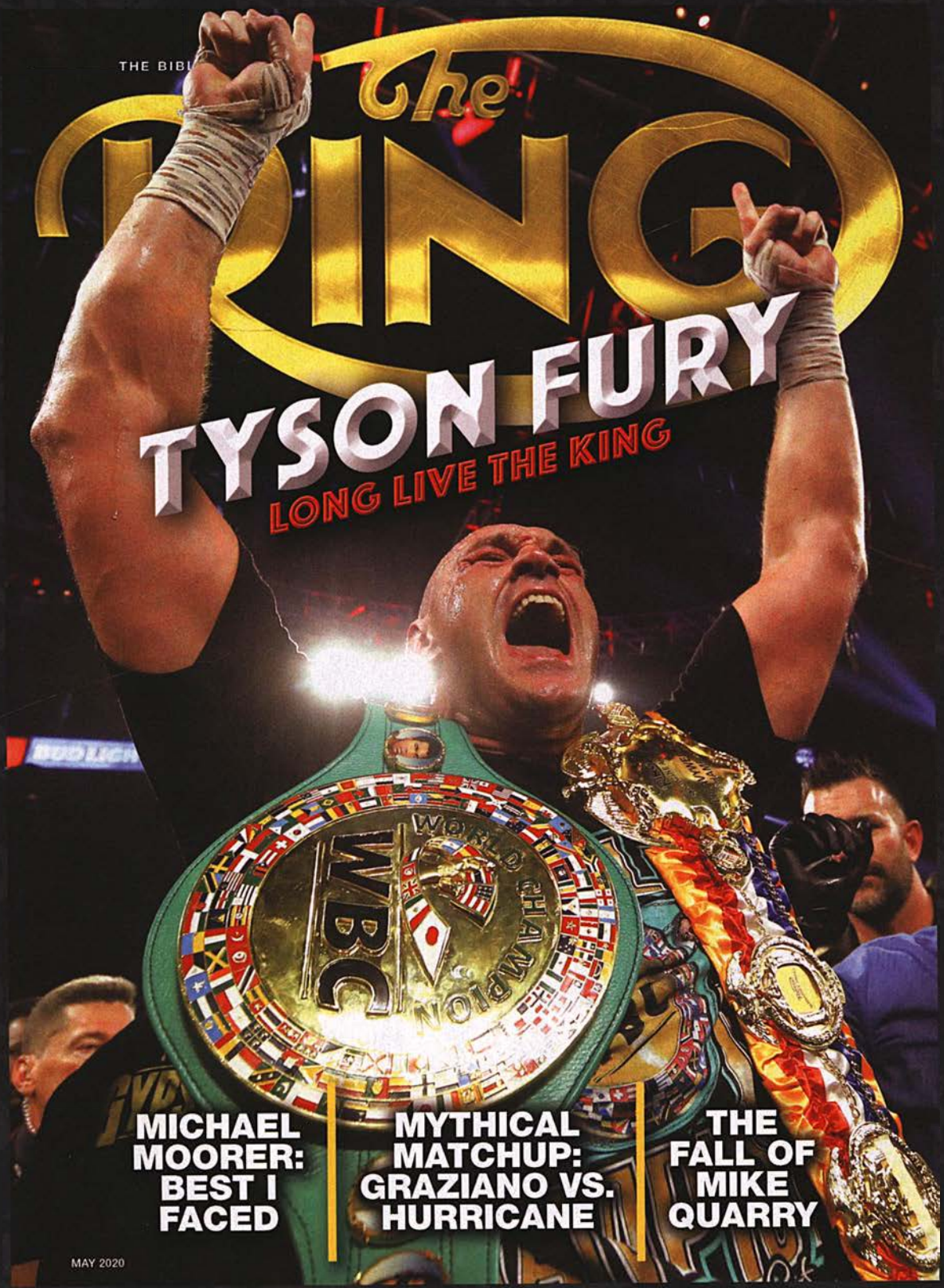

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Victory is always sweet, but Roman Gonzalez appreciated his win over Kal Yafai even more because he was thought to be on the downside of a Hall of Fame-worthy career coming into the WBA 115-pound title bout.

A CHAMPION FOREVER

ROMAN GONZALEZ ENTERED THE RING AS THE UNDERDOG AGAINST **KAL YAFAI** BUT TURNED BACK THE HANDS OF TIME TO WIN YET ANOTHER WORLD TITLE

By **Tom Gray**

It was Round 9, and Kal Yafai, perilously close to a corner, could only escape to his right. His opponent, four-weight world titleholder Roman Gonzalez, had moved quickly to cut off the left side. The legendary Nicaraguan had purposefully given Yafai an escape route, and when he took it, Gonzalez released a debilitating left hook to the body. The timing was exceptional. Despite having been knocked down and hurt in the eighth, Yafai took the punch well and found center ring. Gonzalez, however, reached him fast – very fast – and the Englishman's shock was clear when he poked out a tepid left hand. Gonzalez seized the moment, flooring Yafai with a perfect one-

TOM PENNINGTON

Yafai, the fresher, bigger fighter, exuded confidence at the weigh-in.

two combination and, just like that, "Chocolatito" was the new WBA junior bantamweight titleholder.

The finish was effortless, but the journey to reach that point was anything but. Gonzalez, formerly The Ring's No. 1 pound-for-pound fighter, hadn't won a world title bout since September 2016, when he outpointed then-WBC 115-pound beltholder Carlos Cuadras. Tragedy, misfortune and devastation soon followed. Two months after the Cuadras triumph, Gonzalez's longtime trainer, Arnulfo Obando, passed away following a stroke. On March 18, 2017, Srisaket Sor Rungvisai handed Gonzalez his first defeat in 47 fights via controversial decision and repeated the dose six months later with a pulverizing fourth-round knockout. Many felt the Gonzalez era was over.

There was a knee surgery in late 2018 and only two fights in two years, but now, suddenly, Gonzalez was back on top. However, the Yafai fight, which took place at the Ford Center at the Star in Frisco, Texas, on February 29, was actually an undercard attraction. It supported the 147-pound non-title bout between Mikey Garcia and Jessie Vargas, but the fans that left the arena that night had their money's worth before the main event began. Gonzalez is a legend in this sport, one of the finest boxers of this generation, and to see him in person and fighting in top form is a privilege. But what does this victory really mean, and what does the future hold for boxing's holy warrior?

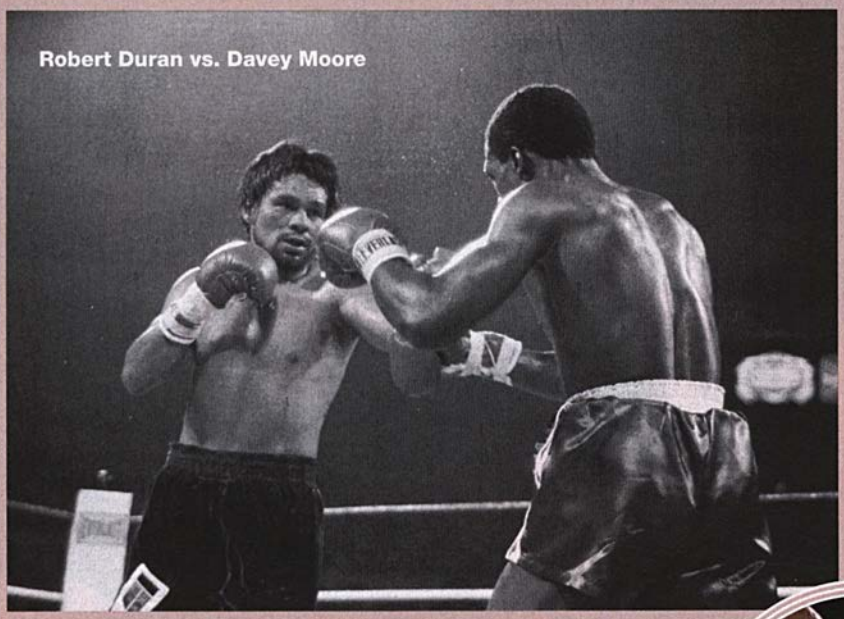
"I'm so happy with God to have been given the opportunity to be a world champion once again," Gonzalez told The Ring through his manager, Carlos Blandon. "I value it so much more now, and I missed being world champion. To be able to get back up proves greatness. God has blessed me with the talent to keep harvesting victories and receiving these accolades around the world. I try to show young kids that everything you want to achieve in life is attainable as long as you put the work in.

"I've met a lot of new fans since this victory. The people that love me always wish me the best, and I identify with those people, but there are a lot of fans that have even more love for me now. Today, more than ever, my fans are happy that I'm world champion. This fight with Yafai was also special because there were some people who had never seen me fight live, and they were very proud of me. If it goes well for me, it goes well for them."

It went very well. Yafai came into this bout unbeaten in 26 fights with 15 knockouts. The British Olympian had won the title in December 2016 by outpointing battle-hardened veteran Luis Concepcion, and he made five successful defenses.

FROM THE ASHES

BOXING HISTORY IS REPLETE WITH INSTANCES WHERE LEGENDARY FIGHTERS, BELIEVED TO BE FADED, HAVE OVERCOME THE ODDS TO DETHRONE YOUNGER AND FRESHER WORLD TITLEHOLDERS



Robert Duran vs. Davey Moore

EDER JOFRE MD 15
JOSE LEGRA
MAY 5, 1973, GINASIO PRESIDENTE MEDICI, BRASÍLIA, BRAZIL

Brazilian great Jofre surrendered his undisputed bantamweight title to Fighting Harada in May 1965 and lost the rematch a year later. Over a seven-year period, Jofre rebounded with 14 straight wins against modest opposition but, at 37, he was a big underdog against Cuba's WBC featherweight titleholder, Jose Legra, who was seven years his junior. Jofre survived an early knockdown and lacerations around both eyes to pull off a stunning points win.

ROBERTO DURAN TKO 8
DAVEY MOORE
JUNE 16, 1983, MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, NEW YORK CITY

Still smarting from his ignominious surrender to Sugar Ray Leonard in their "No Mas" rematch, Duran dropped lackluster decisions to Wilfred Benitez and Kirkland Laing in 1982. As a result, few gave the iconic Panamanian a chance against unbeaten WBA junior middleweight titleholder Davey Moore. The critics should have known better. Duran, 32, punished the 24-year-old Bronx star terribly and picked up his third divisional title against the odds. The great "Hands of Stone" would pull off a similar shock against Iran Barkley in February 1989 to win a middleweight title.

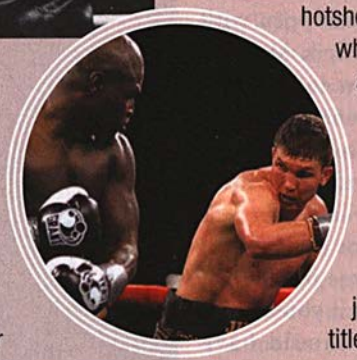
Thomas Hearns vs. Virgil Hill

THOMAS HEARNS UD 12
VIRGIL HILL
JUNE 3, 1991, CAESARS PALACE, LAS VEGAS

Hearns, 32, was already a first-ballot Hall of Famer and a five-weight world champion when he agreed to face long-reigning WBA light heavyweight titleholder Virgil Hill. The Hitman's form had been patchy in recent years – many believed that he was shot – and the unbeaten Hill was installed as a 2½-to-1 favorite. The oddsmakers blew it. Hearns dictated behind a face-busting left jab and crossed over enough big rights on the 26-year-old Hill to win a decision in what was his final triumph in a world title bout.

MARK JOHNSON MD 12
FERNANDO MONTIEL
AUGUST 16, 2003, MOHEGAN SUN CASINO, UNCASVILLE, CONNECTICUT

Johnson, 32, was a former pound-for-pound entrant who had lost his air of invincibility following back-to-back defeats to Mexico's Rafael Marquez. One year later, the Washington, D.C., native was considered over-the-hill when he faced another Mexican hotshot, Fernando Montiel, who was 24 years old and undefeated. "Too Sharp," however, lived up to his nickname, producing the final great win of his Hall of Fame career and claiming the WBO junior bantamweight title in the process.



James Toney vs. Vassily Jirov

JAMES TONEY UD 12
VASSILY JIROV
APRIL 26, 2003, FOXWOODS RESORT, MASHANTUCKET, CONNECTICUT

Toney, a former middleweight and super middleweight champion, was 34 and hadn't held a world title in almost a decade when he challenged IBF cruiserweight king Vassily Jirov. In a near-perfect display of quality over quantity, Toney, an old-school counterpunching genius in the Ezzard Charles vein, turned the Kazakhstani champ's volume-punching style against him. A brutal knockdown in the final round compounded a magnificent performance from the veteran warrior, who handed the 29-year-old Jirov his first career defeat.

Gonzalez was the underdog – a rarity – but despite a slow start, he had shown more than a few flashes of the genius that took him to four divisional titles and pound-for-pound supremacy.

"It was pleasantly surprising to me that Gonzalez was able to recapture his form," said Ring Magazine Editor-in-Chief Doug Fischer, who confidently selects Gonzalez as his Fighter of the Decade. "I didn't think he had it in the first round or two; he looked like he was just going through the motions and didn't have his full confidence, but it didn't take him long to turn back the clock. He began to execute the way he did five or six years ago, and that's special. The old-timers call that 'fighting your way back into shape,' where you don't recapture your peak form in training camp; it actually happens during the fight. We've seen that happen with other great fighters. Erik Morales would start very slow in his later years, but if the opponent allowed him to get into a groove, he would recapture his form and cause them real trouble."

However, against Sor Rungvisai it was Gonzalez who was in trouble, and plenty of it. Even if you believe that "Chocolatito" should have been triumphant against the Thai power-puncher in the first fight, it was a lot closer than you expected, and the one-punch knockout loss in the return could have been career-ending. Are fans getting too excited about the Yafai victory? What's really changed since that brutal defeat in Carson, California?

"It was very difficult to see Roman lose the first fight to Sor Rungvisai, although we believe he won it," admitted Blandon, who has been Gonzalez's manager for almost six years. "The record book shows it was a loss, and we had to accept that, but in the second fight, Roman felt that he shouldn't have been there. We had a great camp in Japan, he made weight good, but something was just missing. Entering the ring,

Gonzalez scored a bloody stoppage of Moises Fuentes in 2018.

he looked sad; he looked different, and mentally he just wasn't there. When he got knocked out, he hit rock bottom, and to see him doubt himself as the legendary boxer he had become really hurt me. I'm his manager, but more than that we're like brothers, we're great friends, and we trust each other. When you see someone fall like that, you definitely feel bad for them, but at the same time you feel a responsibility to help that person. All I wanted to do was help as much as possible, and I think he's evolved greatly as a champion but also as a person. He's accomplished so much, he's a great boxer, but now he's overcome adversity.

"His fighting form is great again. We always thank God for everything that's happened to us. It was fortunate that his knee was injured in the buildup to his (canceled) fight with Pedro Guevara and that it wasn't before a title fight, because that would have been worse. At the same time, the injury meant that he got a great surgery, and that prepared him for a great comeback. The meniscus (cartilage in the knee joint) injury can really affect you and stop you from doing cardio. After surgery, he was feeling great, there were no problems and he was doing a lot more cardio work. And the physiotherapy really helped, too. We brought in a (strength and conditioning coach) from Costa Rica, Rafael Rojas, and he's had such a great impact on Roman's career."

But despite all the things that Gonzalez was able to change and all the pain and anguish that he has been able to suppress, he still had to drag his 32-year-old body through yet another grueling training camp under coach Marcos Caballero. The Nicaraguan great turned professional in July 2005 and this was his 51st fight. Having been there and done everything, isn't it harder for

Gonzalez warmed up his brilliant ring craft early in the fight, then finished Yafai in the late rounds.

TOM PENNINGTON

Gonzalez to get motivated at this point of his career?

"I never stopped loving boxing, because it has brought so much passion and love in my life," said the future Hall of Famer. "Yes, the rest I had following surgery helped me and prepared me to come back from those losses, but my family, particularly my children, motivated me. This victory meant a lot to me because I promised my children that I was going to be world champion again. That's why I put so much effort and heart into my training, and all the sacrifice was worth it. This wasn't just my fight; it was my family's fight. I was able to rise again, stronger, and I feel better than ever before.

"I would tell Kal Yafai the same thing. He needs to keep pushing forward, because everything is possible in life. When you lose and get back up again, you become bigger than before. He should praise God, and God will keep loving him and his family. He can continue to get better and attain all the things that he wants in life in order to become a world champion again."

But while Yafai wants to become world champion again, Gonzalez wants to remain world champion, and that will not be an easy task. The 115-pound division is bursting with elite-level combatants, all of whom will be eager to knock the old gladiator off his perch. Gonzalez may start as the favorite against one or two of them, but he'll have his hands full against any of the rival titleholders and contenders located within the Top 5.

"I want to say he's back, because he's my guy and I'm a huge fan of Gonzalez," said Fischer before reminding even the most ardent of Gonzalez rooters to err on the side of caution. "I don't know if Kal Yafai had maybe outgrown the division and was dying on the vine after having so many inconsequential title defenses. He looked huge at 115 and I'm not surprised that he's talking about going up to 118. Or maybe Yafai was the weak link at 115 pounds. I don't like to think that, because I was impressed with Yafai on his way to the title; I was impressed when he won it. But, and I have to admit this, I was not impressed with him as a defending titleholder.

"However, the form that Gonzalez showed against Yafai and the experience that he has makes me think that he'll be a handful for anybody. It's just that the junior bantamweight division is so deep. And it's not just deep; he's up against guys who are experienced like him. There are two other four-division titleholders at 115 pounds: Donnie Nietes and Kazuto Ioka. Sor Rungvisai is still out there, and he might just have his number. And our (Ring Magazine) champion, Juan Francisco Estrada, is a two-division titleholder and an elite-level fighter; he's on everyone's pound-for-pound list and he deserves to be."

On November 17, 2012, Gonzalez defended his WBA junior flyweight title against Estrada at the Sports Arena in Los Angeles. It was Estrada's first world championship fight, but his lack of experience was far from obvious. The classy Mexican boxer-puncher displayed incredible skill and guts, hanging tough with one of the finest pound-for-pound fighters on the planet before dropping a 12-round unanimous decision. Hyperbole to one side, this was one of the Top 5 fights of the decade.

"Right now we're very interested in unifying with Estrada; that's a fight that we definitely want," said Blandon. "Estrada is a great person and we've become great friends with his trainer, Alfredo Caballero, when he came to visit Nicaragua. There's great chemistry for a fight, and I think it's going to be a great event.

"We're also interested in a third fight with Sor Rungvisai. That is also a great fight, and Roman and the whole team want it. If God gives us the opportunity to fight both Estrada and Sor Rungvisai, then I know, with God's help, we can be victorious. We know that (Jerwin) Ancajas has (the IBF) belt and Kazuto Ioka has (the WBO belt). Ioka has somewhat of a history with Roman because he didn't want to fight him at 108. But we love Japan; we feel like it's a second home for us, and our father-figure, Mr. Honda, is of Teiken Promotions, so we would love a fight with Ioka. Our priority is Estrada, but after that, we want to unify all the belts."

Throughout my conversation with Gonzalez, which was our first, the great Alexis Arguello would frequently enter my mind. Like "Chocolatito," the great "El Flaco Explosivo" hailed from Nicaragua, he was a multi-weight world champion and he carried himself with identical dignity and class. Gonzalez, who was mentored by the legendary Hall of Famer during his early years, never forgets.

"He would be very happy and proud of me," said the new titleholder. "After my father, it was Alexis Arguello that taught me how to box and do so many great things in the ring. I always listened to him and used his advice in my career. But I'm also very happy that my current team is strong and very confident. I feel blessed that God has put the key members of my team together because that led to me becoming world champion again.

"It was very hard, very difficult for me when Arnulfo passed away. But I had to acknowledge that life is that simple – one day you're here, one day you're not – and you have to live for today. When I found out he had passed away, I decided that I had to start living and remember all the good things that I learned from Arnulfo. I had to remember his teachings and all the things that led me on the path to victory."

One day you're here, one day you're not, but Roman Gonzalez will be a champion forever. And that's regardless of what the future holds for this incredible prizefighter.

Tom Gray is Associate Editor for Ring Magazine. Follow him on Twitter: @Tom_Gray_Boxing.

ROMAN GONZALEZ:
GREATEST HITS

THE LEGENDARY FOUR-WEIGHT TITLEHOLDER REVISITS SIX FIGHTS THAT HELPED BUILD HIS BOXING LEGACY AND TRANSFORM HIM INTO ONE OF THE BEST FIGHTERS OF HIS GENERATION

By **Anson Wainwright**

Roman Gonzalez was the standard-bearer for boxing's lightest weight classes and helped pave the way for sub-bantamweights to appear on premium cable in the United States. As he moved up in weight, he proved time and time again how special he was, eventually earning the top spot in The Ring's mythical pound-for-pound rankings during the middle of the 2010s.

This past February, three years after losing his No. 1 status and unbeaten record to Srisaket Sor Rungvisai, Gonzalez showed us how great he still is with an eye-opening destruction of Khalid Yafai to regain a portion of the junior bantamweight title. »

Roman Gonzalez made Nicaraguan boxing history on September 10, 2016, when he defeated Carlos Cuadras to win a major world title in a fourth weight class via hard-fought unanimous decision.

Gonzalez was born in the Nicaraguan capital of Managua on June 16, 1987. He endured a tough start to life.

"We had hard times like everybody," Gonzalez (49-2, 41 knockouts) told The Ring. "My family is poor. Sometimes we did not have enough to eat. We were, however, a happy and united family.

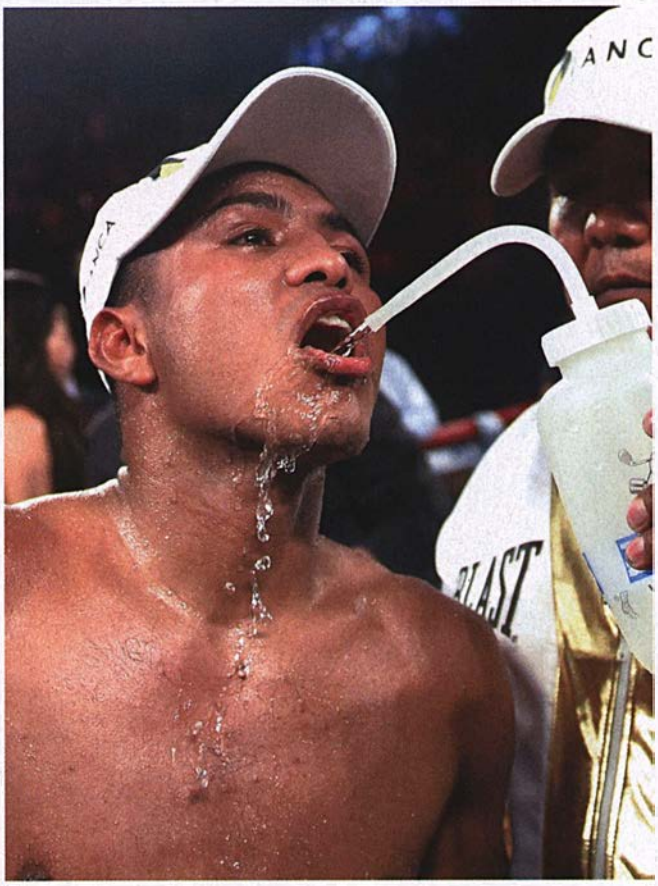
"I am a third-generation fighter. My grandfather was a fighter; my father and uncles were fighters. My brothers have practiced the sport as well, but I am the only one who currently boxes professionally. I also have some cousins who box in Nicaragua professionally."

Gonzalez reportedly compiled an 88-0 record during his amateur career, the pinnacle of which was winning a gold medal at the 2004 Central American Championships. He elected to turn professional and made his debut two weeks after his 18th birthday in his home country.

"Chocolatito" steamrolled the opposition, winning his first 16 fights inside the distance. In September 2008, he traveled to Japan and won his first world title, bludgeoning respected WBA 105-pound beltholder Yutaka Niida into defeat in four rounds.

Gonzalez made three defenses of his strawweight belt before moving up to junior flyweight, where he quickly became the WBA 108-pound titleholder. Five defenses followed, notably against future two-weight world champion Juan Francisco Estrada in Los Angeles.

Having outgrown his division again, Gonzalez moved up to flyweight and eventually stopped Akira Yaegashi for the Ring and WBC titles in Japan. After one defense and a non-title homecoming bout, Gonzalez was back in the U.S., where, fighting on the undercard of Gennadiy Golovkin vs. Willie Monroe Jr., he was dubbed "Little Drama Show." His next two fights were also on Golovkin undercards. It was arguably the middle performance, against Brian Viloria, that Gonzalez was at his best, stopping the four-time titleholder in nine rounds.



Gonzalez has faced the best of boxing's four lightest divisions: strawweight, junior flyweight, flyweight and junior bantamweight.

Once again, Gonzalez was looking to test himself and decided to step up to junior bantamweight and face then-unbeaten WBC beltholder Carlos Cuadras. The Nicaraguan was undersized but not underskilled, and he won a hard-fought unanimous decision.

Gonzalez lost for the first time in thrilling fashion against the relatively unknown Srisaket Sor Rungvisai in March 2017 by majority decision, though many felt he deserved to win. However, any controversy was rendered moot when the power-punching Thai knocked out Gonzalez in devastating fashion six months later.

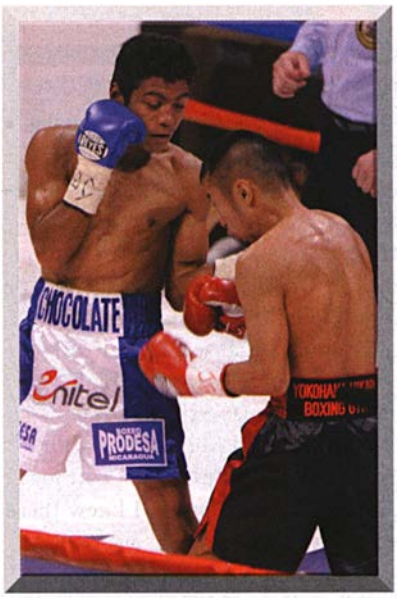
Gonzalez returned with a win before sitting out much of 2019 with a knee injury. After a December tune-up, the mighty Nicaraguan rolled back the years with a virtuoso performance, stopping the undefeated Yafai in nine rounds to add the WBA 115-pound title to his already impressive haul of titles.

Although he has surpassed the achievements of the late, great Alexis Arguello, Gonzalez is full of praise for his mentor.

"He taught me what it means to represent Nicaragua in boxing abroad," he said humbly. "He was an international star and an ambassador of the sport. Most importantly, he was a good friend, a good person and somebody who really cared about the fighters."

Gonzalez, now 32, is divorced and has three children. He lives in Managua on a farm that he bought after winning his third world title and called it "Quinta Teiken" to honor his Japan-based promoter, Teiken. Away from boxing, he helps children with cancer and belongs to a reforestation program called Guardabarranco. He also owns various properties and is involved in real estate in his homeland.

Gonzalez enjoyed looking back on his career, reminiscing on six career-defining victories for the readers of The Ring.



YUTAKA NIIDA

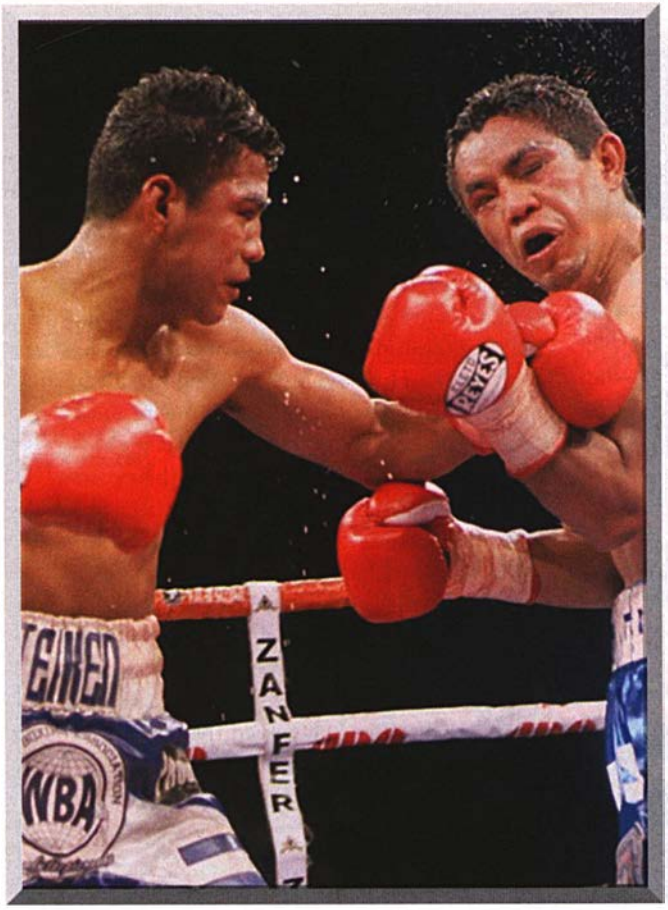
September 15, 2008, Pacifico, Yokohama, Japan • Titles: WBA strawweight

"It was a very beautiful experience to be able to go to Japan. I remember when I went to Tokyo, it was amazing to see so many buildings and to know I was going to meet the legendary Mr. (Akihiko) Honda (president of Teiken Promotions). To see Japan and the culture was a big blessing; it was definitely different from what I was accustomed to in my country.

"It was a very hard and difficult fight. Niida was very fast and very strong. I remember the fight perfectly well. In the second round, I started to pressure a little bit more and I was able to start hurting Niida. In the third round, I kept up the attack and felt I was hurting him more, and I felt it was a good opportunity to keep pushing. In the fourth round, we exchanged punches and they stopped the fight; both of his eyes were closed. He was a great fighter, and it was impressive to win a world title. I knew I needed to throw combinations, and they worked really well.

"When I returned to Nicaragua, there were so many people at the airport. We went to my neighborhood, Barrio La Esperanza, where everybody was waiting for me, and everybody was really happy. I was really happy with what I had accomplished. I met the president and he gave me a house; it was my first house. I was really happy, really joyful for all the merits I received, because at the same time I was able to help my family. Alexis Arguello told me it was very important to become a world champion but even more important to be able to maintain yourself as one. Alexis was very happy with me and felt very proud of the work he had done – Alexis trained me for that fight, my first world title, so many long hours. He was very happy I had won. He knew me better than anybody and what I had to offer. Alexis didn't travel to Japan for that fight; he commentated on the fight for international TV."

RESULT: GONZALEZ TKO 4

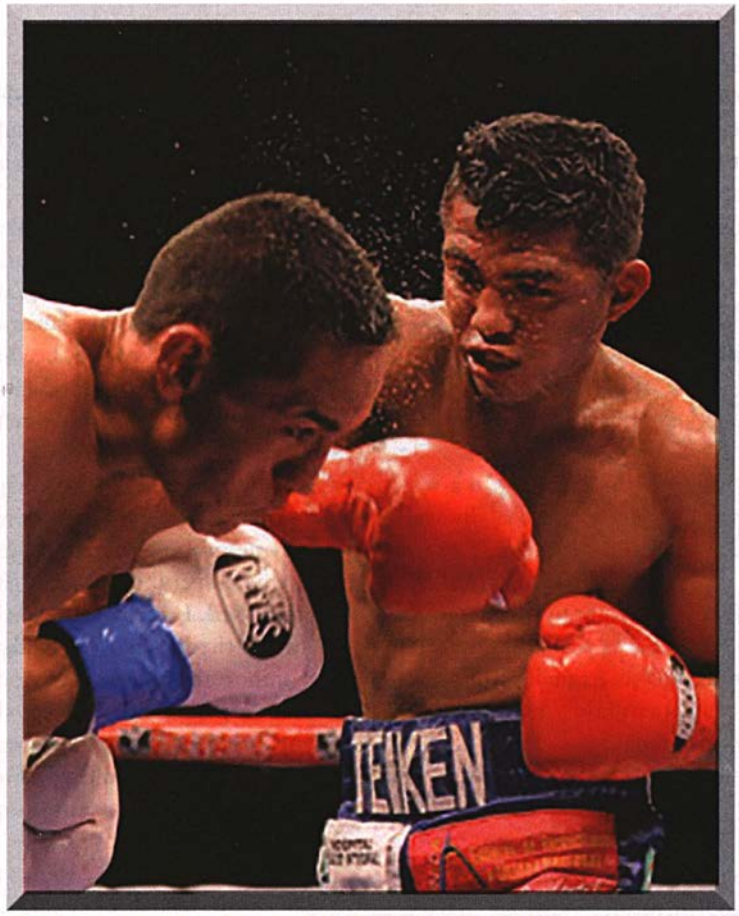


MANUEL VARGAS

March 19, 2011, Plaza San Diego, San Pedro Cholula, Mexico • Titles: WBA junior flyweight

"I didn't win my 108-pound title against Manuel Vargas; I won (the interim title) against 'Chiquita' Rosas in Japan. (Editor's Note: Gonzalez was elevated to full WBA titleholder status in February 2011.) After the fight with Rosas, I was going to fight Kazuto Ioka, and Ioka paid a fee so he didn't have to fight me. Then I was going to fight Juan Carlos Reveco, and he vacated the title and didn't want to fight. Then I became interim champion and then I became full champion. I made five defenses and moved up in weight. I remember at the beginning, in Mexico, I wasn't treated like I am now. The first fights in Mexico were very hard. They wouldn't pick me up at the airport. They made me wait in a tent before the fight. I wasn't given too much peace before the fights, but that changed with time. The Manuel Vargas fight was a very, very difficult fight. I definitely like to fight in my opponent's backyard; it's scary to fight in their backyards, but it's a lot scarier to fight in my country, because there is a lot of additional pressure."

RESULT: GONZALEZ UD 12

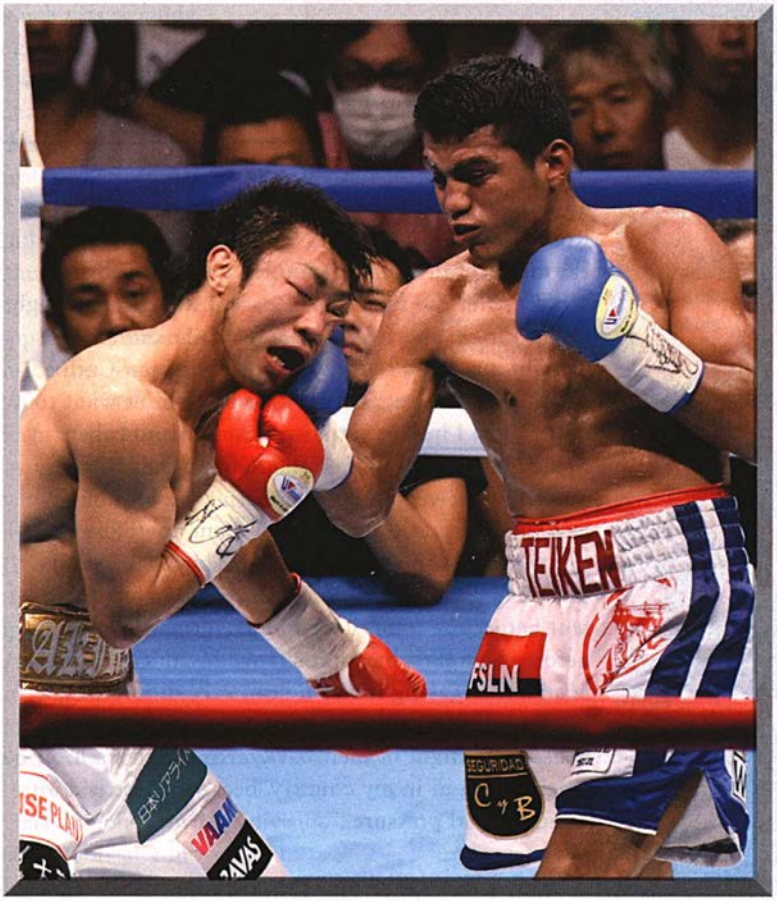


JUAN FRANCISCO ESTRADA

November 17, 2012, Sports Arena, Los Angeles • Titles: WBA junior flyweight

"I remember my second fight in America was very difficult also, against a southpaw (Ramon Garcia Hirales). It worked out well, and to be able to fight 'El Gallo' Estrada on a bigger stage was really good, because I had already fought a lot of Mexican warriors. I fought with diarrhea against Omar Salado. I fought so many top prospects and Mexican warriors in Mexico. So to fight Juan 'El Gallo' Estrada meant a lot, and on a bigger stage. I knew there was pressure, but it made me fight even better; I want to overcome any type of obstacle. It was an incredible fight, and I'd like to fight him again. I believe when I fought Estrada, he had trained very well and was in great condition. And maybe it wasn't known at the time, but that helped him to be in the position he is in today (Estrada is the current Ring junior bantamweight champion). It was a very difficult fight. It was a great fight; that's why I would like to repeat that fight someday."

RESULT: GONZALEZ UD 12



AKIRA YAEGASHI

September 5, 2014, Yoyogi No. 2 Gymnasium, Tokyo • Titles: Ring/WBC flyweight

"It was a great fight. It was great to be able to win a third world title. And to win the Ring title was an even bigger accomplishment, because I remember great champions like Alexis Arguello and Oscar De La Hoya who got a Ring belt. It meant not to be just a champion but to have the heart of a champion. ... It was great to be able to tie Alexis' record (becoming a three-division titleholder) but I have always said even if I won five or six world titles, Alexis will always be No. 1. He was like a father figure. He was my mentor; he taught me how to be a world champion, to believe I could be one. He was the first world champion of Nicaragua, and that meant so much to him. He paved the way for the rest of us. Even if I win more world titles, I'll never be as good as Alexis Arguello. He'll always be No. 1."

RESULT: GONZALEZ TKO 9

BRIAN VILORIA

October 17, 2015, Madison Square Garden, New York • Titles: Ring/ WBC flyweight

"It was incredible to be on the same card as Gennadiy Golovkin; I admire him very much. It meant a lot. He is a great champion. I send him my blessings and greetings. It was probably one of my best performances. That and my (previous) fight with Edgar Sosa catapulted my fan base within the boxing world. I liked it so much because of the history that Brian Viloria has and what a great world champion he had been."

RESULT: GONZALEZ TKO 9

CARLOS CUADRAS

September 10, 2016, The Forum, Inglewood, California • Titles: WBC junior bantamweight

"It was one of my most memorable fights, not just to beat a bigger Cuadras but to win and fight against a champion at junior bantamweight and to take his unbeaten record (Cuadras was 35-0-1). It was a very difficult fight. I had to be in the best physical condition of my life. It was a great feat. I had been received by people at the airport (after previous fights), but not as much as when I had beat Cuadras for the fourth world title. So many people came to see me. I may fight and win more world titles in the future, but I don't think I'll ever be received by so many people and so much love as I was after that fight.

"I've fought against great fighters, and I'd definitely like to achieve a fifth world title. There is still a lot of strength and a lot of motivation within me to conquer another world title. There are still a lot of people I would like to fight. To win another world title is something I am going to prepare myself to do."

RESULT: GONZALEZ UD 12

Carlos Blandon helped coordinate and translate this feature. The Ring appreciates his assistance. Questions and/or comments can be sent to Anson at elraincoat@live.co.uk and you can follow him on Twitter @AnsonWainwright.

STAND STILL

WITH THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC CAUSING WIDESPREAD FEARS OF CONTAGION, BOXING CANCELED ITS EVENTS AND HUNKERED DOWN WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD

By **Tris Dixon**

Boxing is no stranger to confusion. In fact, in some perverse way, it thrives on it.

But over the space of a few days in the middle of March this year, it didn't know if it was coming or going. As the coronavirus (COVID-19) spread globally with deep repercussions, boxing did as boxing does and did its very own thing.

Shows were canceled. There was talk of some going ahead with doors closed to the public. Some did and others were postponed. Press conferences were held for fights that might or might not happen, and Olympic qualifiers took place as amateurs battled over a Tokyo Games that had become shrouded in doubt, with talk of delays as long as two years.

It was crazy, really.

The sporting calendar went into lockdown. The European soccer championship was rumored to be on the move. Champions League soccer was off. In the U.S., the NBA came to a halt, although a UFC card took place in an empty arena.

The COVID-19 outbreak started in China but spread rapidly. Matchroom's March 27 show in Italy, featuring Devis Boschiero and Francesco Patera, was one of the first boxing events to fall by the wayside. Italy was soon in lockdown.

Meanwhile, Japanese hero Naoya Inoue was flying to the U.S. unsure of whether his April 25 bout with John Riel Casimero at Mandalay Bay was going to take place or if it would be held in a quarantined studio, if at all. Starting on March 17, Las Vegas casinos were closed until further notice.

The two Top Rank shows in Madison Square Garden's Hulu Theater, headlined by Shakur Stevenson on Saturday, March 14, and by Michael Conlan on St. Patrick's Day were initially going to be held in an empty venue and broadcast live. They made it as far as the fight week press conferences, and Conlan fired over a message to this writer explaining some of his amateur experiences traveling the world and fighting in sparse arenas, saying, "It's

The European Olympic boxing qualifying tournament for the 2020 Summer Games was held inside an empty Copper Box Arena in London, due to COVID-19 concerns.

nothing new to me as a fighter. I've done it many times as an amateur, so just got to go in and do the business now. It might be a bit weird in an empty arena, but I've put the hard work in, so I'll get the job done."

Then the shows were pulled. A day or so later, Conlan was back in Ireland.

The situation was slightly more fluid in the U.K., with many claiming the government should have been more forceful with instructing citizens to self-isolate in order to relieve pressure on the country's health service. Matchroom hosted a press conference to announce the May 23 bout between Aleksandr Usyk and Derek Chisora while Queensberry Promotions fired out a statement to emphatically say that the eagerly anticipated April 11 heavyweight clash between Daniel Dubois and Joe Joyce was on and would stay that way. A few days later, the latter show was off, as was another O2 Arena date that was due to feature Josh Kelly vs. David Avanesyan.

Dubois-Joyce was shifted to July 11. The fights on the Kelly-Avanesyan bill would be spread across other shows later in the year, and Lewis Ritson's April 4 date with Miguel Vazquez was pushed back to June 27.

Still, an exciting cruiserweight clash went ahead in Liverpool on March 14, meaning the two-round war between Jay Farrell and Damian Chambers, which saw the latter climb off the deck to win in thrilling fashion for the British Central Area title, was seen by far more eyeballs than it would have been had it not been for other shows biting the dust.

Many of those big heavyweight events would make good money, but they can't be done without earnings from the gate.

Another major event that fell through was the show on April 17 that was going to see Regis Prograis return against Maurice Hooker in Maryland – a bill that was also set to feature Ring Magazine pound-for-pound queen Cecilia Braekhus, Filip Hrgovic and Daniyar Yeleussinov, who was due to face former unified titleholder Julius Indongo.

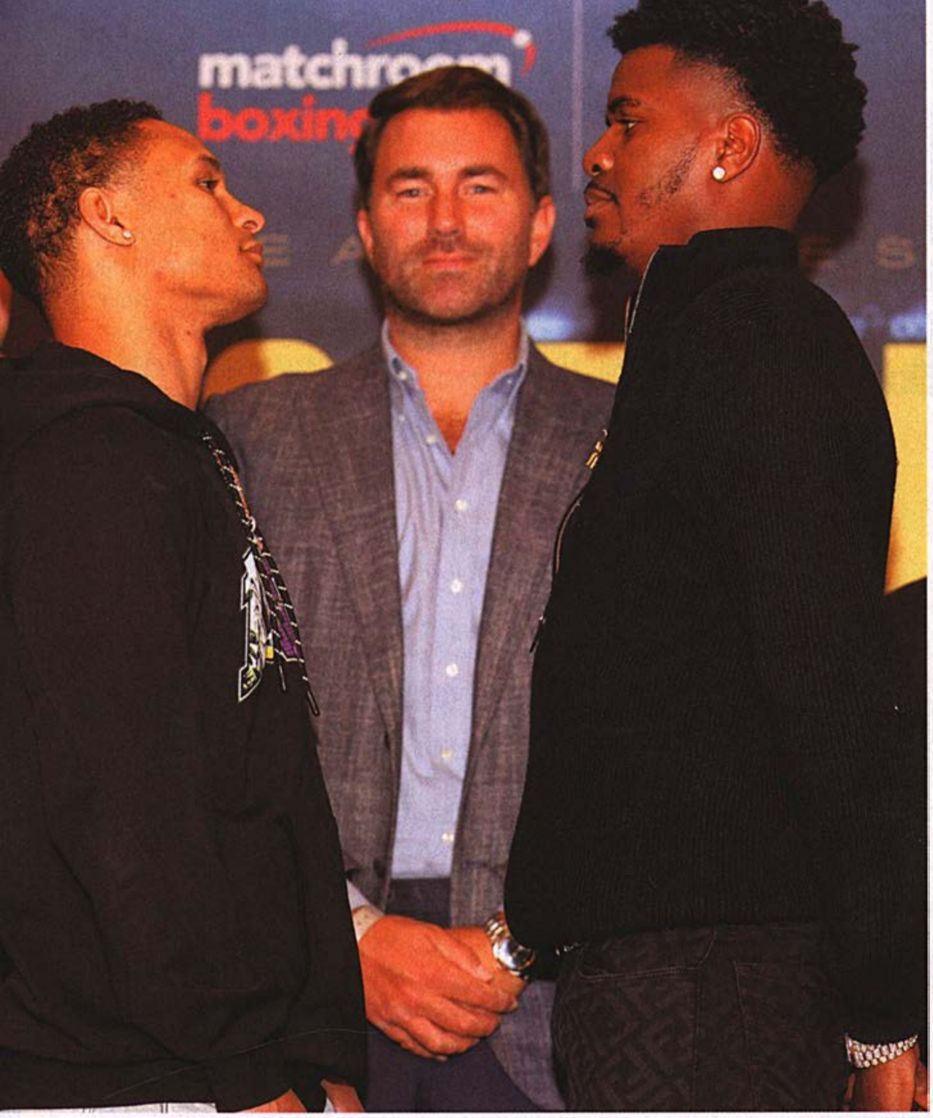
It was supposed to be a summer of big heavyweight shows – and it might still be, depending on how it all unfolds. Only a week or so earlier, Matchroom had announced that Dillian Whyte would meet Alexander Povetkin in Manchester on May 2 and that Anthony Joshua would collide with Kubrat Pulev at the new Tottenham Hotspur Stadium on June 20. Those fights were in doubt at the time of writing, but they were still on.

"We are led by government decisions," said Matchroom boss Eddie Hearn on March 16 in a highly changeable time. "Right now, there is no ban on live events in the U.K., but obviously that can change. We are certainly open to events behind closed doors, but the bigger events are always dependent on the revenue generated at the box office. There are plenty of moving parts, but we are thinking on our feet to make sure our fighters are taken care of and the public safety is of course considered. From a fan's perspective, any canceled events would lead to a full refund. But right now it's business as usual until we are told otherwise."

The next day, the British Boxing Board of Control stopped events taking place for the remainder of March and all of April.

With his entrepreneurial hat on, Hearn continued: "While it's going to cause short-term chaos, we do believe there will be an opportunity in that period to create additional fresh content. There's a clear lack of live sport, and any rights holder that

Briedis-Dorticos was moved from March 21 to May 16.



The Prograis-Hooker bout was pushed off its April 17 date.

can come up with the right format in this environment will be well-received. So we are looking at formats in terms of where fights are staged but also additional content outside of the ropes."

Another fight that was off was the World Boxing Super Series cruiserweight final between Mairis Briedis and Yuniel Dorticos. It was scheduled for March 21 in Riga, Latvia, but when that nation banned events until April 14, promoter Kalle Sauerland switched the date to May 16, allowing some leeway while also being optimistic as the world spiralled into an almost unheard-of lockdown.

By that point, Las Vegas and New York were pretty much closed for business.

"The coronavirus is affecting all industries at the moment, including the sports and entertainment business, and it's of grave concern," said Sauerland in mid-March. "No one in our business is an expert on the coronavirus and its medical implications, so the first thing is to look at everything on a safety-first basis. We are in close contact when it comes to the final (say) with the authorities around that – the government, local government, the arenas, the legal authorities – and most of them are working under the (recommendations) set out by the World Health Organization. Basically, we are in a ship we are steering along the lines of where the authorities are giving us advice. Ultimately, we have to rely on the advice of experts and we aren't experts, but we will put safety first."

Sauerland's plan was to complete season two of the WBSS in Riga and then announce season three, including the weight classes. That's all taken a back seat.

"One thing is for sure, this will hold up the whole business well into Q3 and Q4 this year, so there is absolutely no certainty or predictions on when we expect season three to take place," he added.

Then something very boxing happened. A fight that had not even been announced was postponed – not the announcement, but the fight.

Reports of negotiations to pair WBO super middleweight titleholder Billy Joe Saunders with Canelo Alvarez on May 2 were so prevalent that the official announcement seemed like a formality, but then the conversation switched to June.

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic was not just affecting big-time boxing. Undercard fighters who work from payday to payday found themselves without a date. Others who invested heavily in training camps were out of pocket. Promoters and venues were hit hard. Ex-fighters who rely on punditry work to make ends meet had no shows to cover. The effect was felt around the world, and the shadow of uncertainty it cast over the sport was both long and glum.

Of small consolation were new fans and old conversing online, recommending classic fights to watch.

At least if the fighters of this era can't show us what they've got for a few weeks or months, the sacrifices of the boxers of years gone by can be dusted off to be respected and admired all over again.

At a time when people around the world were being told to self-isolate, fight fans found comfort tuning in to YouTube to watch Julian Letterlough-Julio Cesar Gonzalez, the Micky Ward-Arturo Gatti trilogy, Bobby Chacon versus almost anybody and some of the many Matthew Saad Muhammad classics.

It's not live action. Spoilers are available. But we have to make the best of very unusual and trying times.

VOICES FROM THE OUTBREAK

IN MID-MARCH, AS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC WORSENED AND PUBLIC GATHERINGS OF ALL KINDS WERE BEING CANCELED, THE RING REACHED OUT TO PEOPLE IN VARIOUS LEVELS OF THE BOXING WORLD TO SEE HOW THEY WERE COPING. HERE'S A SNAPSHOT:

"ICEMAN" JOHN SCULLY, BOXING TRAINER:

"This situation immediately impacted me in more ways than one because I was in camp with Artur Beterbiev for more than a month and we were just winding down the training when all of this hit. So I was forced to come back to the USA just a few days ago. The fight is canceled, meaning no fight, no pay, no career advancement for Artur or his team.

"Iceman" John Scully

"Add that to the fact that not only has the gym I am at in Hartford, the Charter Oak Boxing Academy, temporarily closed, but also the several personal-training clients that I work with have erred on the side of caution and stopped training, too. So my two main sources of income within boxing have been directly affected by this. I understand it, these things happen, but it has definitely put a dent in my life in boxing for the time being."

SERGIY DEREVYANCHENKO (13-2, 10 KOS), TWO-TIME MIDDLEWEIGHT TITLE CHALLENGER:

"There's not that much difference in my life, whether I'm in training camp or quarantined. When my training camp starts, I don't come out of the house unless I really need to. I only eat food at home from known ingredients. I don't go to restaurants, and no takeout. I usually avoid places with large gatherings of people in order not to get sick. Even my family lives separately from me during camp. Only if the weather allows, do we train outside. If any one on my team gets sick, they wear a mask, remain in isolation and don't come to the gym. Hence the sport disciplines us as athletes. It's too bad that many boxing events are being canceled due to the coronavirus and no one really knows when things will return to normal. Therefore, everyone should follow good hygiene and take care of yourself and your loved ones."

Sergiy Derevyanchenko

PROMOTER DMITRIY SALITA, DAYS AFTER HIS MARCH 13 SHOW HEADLINED BY BRANDUN LEE VS. CAMILO PRIETO:

"I feel very honored our show was the last one to air on television because the fighters on the card worked so hard to display their talents, and they deserve to compete and to get paid. For many, it's their only source of income. I commend Showtime and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Department of Athletic Regulation in Minnesota for believing in us and all the fighters to keep the show alive in these challenging times.

"We have a lot of exciting cards in limbo now. The March and April cards are postponed and I am hoping the virus is contained by May for us to keep the Claressa Shields-Marie-Eve Dicaire unification bout on May 9 (this show has since been postponed). What's most important is that we keep everyone safe. Everyone should practice social distancing and abide by the CDC guidelines so we can get this infectious disease under control. That's really what's most important. What we do is provide entertainment and a source of distraction to boxing and sports fans, but we must keep safety as our No. 1 priority.

"So, as of now I'm focused on being home and homeschooling my daughters. This is the most important job I have right now, and I'm glad to spend the time with my family."

BRANDUN LEE (19-0, 17 KOS), JUNIOR WELTERWEIGHT PROSPECT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA:

"They shut down all of the restaurants;

> "SO, AS OF NOW I'M FOCUSED ON BEING HOME AND HOMESCHOOLING MY DAUGHTERS. THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT JOB I HAVE RIGHT NOW, AND I'M GLAD TO SPEND THE TIME WITH MY FAMILY."
>
> — Dmitriy Salita

there's only takeout, and even at some grocery stores, there's only 10 people allowed in at a time. It's very hard to find food. I was just trying to find chicken and I had to go to at least four different grocery stores to buy some chicken breast for dinner, so it's starting to be a headache.

"I understand this is a very serious epidemic. I think that it's better to be safe than sorry. If the government says to stay in your house and lock your doors, you gotta do it and try your best not to spread it. I have a gym at my house, so I'm still working out, staying active and staying in shape. I'm staying ready so I don't have to get ready."

IVAN BARANCHYK (20-1, 13 KOS), FORMER IBF JUNIOR WELTERWEIGHT TITLEHOLDER:
"Despite what's going on, I'm staying focused on my training. I want to stay ready so when everything gets back to normal, I'll be in a better place. I'm not spending any more time at home than I usually do. I'm trying to live my life as normal as possible."

PAULIE MALIGNAGGI, BOXING ANALYST AND FORMER TWO-DIVISION TITLEHOLDER:
"The thing about this situation is none of us know how to deal with it perfectly. From what I heard, they say sunlight slows this down, it doesn't spread around as fast. I thought to myself, 'I'll stay in Florida.' I have a place in New York and Florida, so I always go back and forth. I have a lot of family in Italy, and it's been a very difficult time. I was supposed to be in Italy all of March, and then I canceled those plans. What's scary is every day the numbers keep increasing, no matter what everyone tries to do. When I first got here, I thought I'd be much more free. I went to the beach the first couple of days and it seemed normal, but the numbers kept increasing. They have started to ban off the beaches, the restaurants, where only takeout food is allowed; you can't sit in restaurants anymore in South Florida. All places are closed by 5 p.m. Basically, I try to keep it simple. I'm watching some movies."

Paulie Malignaggi

"I'M GOING TO BE SPENDING TIME WITH MY FAMILY FIRST. I WILL TRY TO WORK OUT IN MY GARAGE AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE. I'M AN ATHLETE; I NEED TO BE ACTIVE, SO THIS SUCKS. BUT TO BE HONEST, I UNDERSTAND WHY WE'RE TRYING TO KEEP PEOPLE AWAY FROM EACH OTHER."

— **Shane Mosley Jr.**

SULEM URBINA (12-0, 2 KOS), FLYWEIGHT CONTENDER FROM ARIZONA:
"Well, it's very tough being able to train the right way. The gym where I do my strength and conditioning is closed. It's been raining, so I can't run outside. I am lucky to have borrowed a friend's personal gym that I get to attend in the evenings for a little while. It is also very tough finding the right food for my diet, because there isn't much at grocery stores. I believe this pandemic is real, but we are going about it the wrong way and panic will only make things worse."

WALTER SARNOI (25-4, 16 KOS), JUNIOR LIGHTWEIGHT FROM CALIFORNIA:
"It's been very difficult, because although there's been no confirmed cases of the coronavirus in the country (Laos, where Sarnoi was training), it is confirmed in the neighboring countries. The government has shut down all public events, gatherings; sport gatherings have been canceled. I was in training camp, and suddenly it just stopped. But for the safety of others and my well-being, that is a priority."

EDWARD HENO (14-1-5, 5 KOS), FORMER JUNIOR FLYWEIGHT TITLE CHALLENGER, ON HIS MARCH 28 COMEBACK BOUT IN THE PHILIPPINES BEING CANCELED:
"It's OK to stay away from the virus. We can't do anything. Boxing is like that. We'll just try again next time."

Ivan Redkach

IVAN REDKACH (23-5-1, 18 KOS), UKRAINIAN WELTERWEIGHT:
"Well, since everything is closed, including schools, daycares, gyms and stores, we flew to Mexico, to Tulum. Me and my family are in isolation in paradise. It's nice and peaceful here. Feeling relaxed and no panic."

SHANE MOSLEY JR. (15-3, 9 KOS), MIDDLEWEIGHT ORIGINALLY SET TO BE ON THE APRIL 25 KOVALEV-BARRERA UNDERCARD:
"I'm going to be spending time with my family first. I will try to work out in my garage as much as possible. I'm an athlete; I need to be active, so this sucks. But to be honest, I understand why we're trying to keep people away from each other. We need to try and contain this as much as possible. Yeah, not everyone is going to have it, but in a mass crowd, there is definitely a chance that it could spread even more. This is a dire situation for everybody

around the world, and many families are struggling financially."

JANELSON BOCACHICA (15-0, 10 KOS), WELTERWEIGHT PROSPECT FROM DETROIT WHOSE APRIL 10 SHOBOX FIGHT WAS CANCELED:

"That was supposed to be my TV debut. I'd rather have the show canceled than me get sick or my fans get sick. It's just something that I have to deal with. I had many people who were coming out to see me for this fight. We had vans loaded, and the people who weren't gonna go were gonna watch on TV. It was gonna be a big time for me, but health first, safety first."

Jason Moloney

JASON MOLONEY (20-1, 17 KOS), BANTAMWEIGHT CONTENDER WHO WAS TO APPEAR ON THE NAOYA INOUE-JOHN RIEL CASIMERO CARD IN LAS VEGAS ON APRIL 25:

"I'm obviously very disappointed that my fight against Joshua Greer had to be postponed. I was so excited for this huge opportunity; fighting in such a big fight in Las Vegas really is a dream of mine, so having the fight called off was devastating. This epidemic is having such a big impact on everyone's lives. I just hope that we can get on top of this, and I hope that we can get this fight back ASAP. In times like this, I think it's important to put things into perspective. There are thousands of people dying around the world, so I really can't whine too much. There are obviously a lot of people in far worse situations.

"I'm staying positive and I won't let all my hard work go to waste. I'm still in the gym every day, training very hard. Life isn't that different for me right now. When I'm preparing for a fight, I always put myself into isolation. I live away from my friends and family. All I do is train, rest and train. The isolation part is easy; not fighting and not knowing when I will be able to fight is the difficult part. Things are pretty tough right now. As fighters, we only get paid when we fight. My last fight was in November, so it's going to be at least six months where I haven't earned a cent. My partner is still on maternity leave with our one-year-old daughter. We rely on me fighting to put food on the table and pay bills. If this keeps going, then my wife will be forced back to work or I'll have to try to pick up a part-time job. It's pretty stressful."

Charles Conwell

CHARLES CONWELL (12-0, 9 KOS), CLEVELAND-BASED JUNIOR MIDDLEWEIGHT WHOSE APRIL 10 SHOBOX MAIN EVENT WAS CANCELED:

"When you first hear it, it's frustrating, because you're in the midst of training camp, you're putting your body through great stress, working hard every day and you're leaving your family. Then for it not to happen, it's frustrating for anybody. But then you hear it happened to everybody, so you really can't be that mad. But at the same time, you're like, 'I just want to fight.'

"I'm still in the gym. We've gotta start all over again, re-peak our bodies, because we don't want to overwork ourselves and break our bodies down too much."

ROMAN GONZALEZ (49-2, 41 KOS), WBA JUNIOR BANTAMWEIGHT TITLEHOLDER:

"There's a lot of medicine and research that will help, but the most important thing is to pray to God and give your life to God. We must pray for wisdom and stay healthy. We must keep afloat during this crisis, and I'm praying for everybody's health."

Jamel Herring

JAMEL HERRING (21-2, 10 KOS), WBO JUNIOR LIGHTWEIGHT TITLEHOLDER SCHEDULED AT PRESS TIME TO FACE CARL FRAMPTON ON JUNE 13 IN BELFAST:

"I'm not concerned at all. I really believe that when it's time to kick off my full eight-week training camp, things will have cooled down. Right now, I'm actually using this down time to stay close with my family and rest my body. Truth be told, I'm usually a homebody, so staying in doesn't really bother me. But I hope my team (with trainer Brian 'Bomac' McIntyre, pound-for-pound star Terence Crawford and others) is doing the damn thing right now back in Omaha, Nebraska."

EYE OF THE TIGER MANAGEMENT PROMOTER CAMILLE ESTEPHAN, A DAY AFTER HEARING THAT TWO OF HIS UPCOMING SHOWS HAD BEEN CANCELED:

"I got a call from the commission

"I'M STAYING POSITIVE AND I WON'T LET ALL MY HARD WORK GO TO WASTE. I'M STILL IN THE GYM EVERY DAY, TRAINING VERY HARD.

— Jason Moloney

saying both shows are off. We had 16 fights scheduled and we'd just done the weigh-in for the fight on Thursday. I was shocked. I tried to negotiate and said, 'I understand, I know the health of the public is most important, but can't we have these fights without fans? I'm willing to reimburse tickets sold and do it for TV.' They refused because they were worried about the bodily fluids of the fighters from abroad. So there was no negotiations, they just shut us down. It was a huge disappointment for our fighters. I was impressed because they didn't cry about it. They understand.

"You're talking about 40 or 50 flights, including their camps, and flights are expensive, hotel rooms – all kind of costs. It's a major loss; it's something we couldn't foresee, and I can't blame anyone for that. It's definitely over six figures in losses. Some shows you lose money as a promoter and that's part of the business. But the major cost here is the cost of opportunity – our fighters didn't fight. We don't have wins. There were titles at stake, titles to be defended. We didn't do any of that. That's really where it hurts. The fighters had camps for two months. Eight guys made weight and didn't fight.

"From a boxing perspective, I believe there's going to be an opportunity for us in this crisis. We could be the only sport alive. We're not in a major league. We could be nimble enough to do a TV show in a studio. I'm looking at that right now, hoping in 30 to 40 days to have a show for television. Because of the fact that boxing can be pretty nimble, I'm optimistic. We own our own streaming site called 'Punching Grace,' and because of that we can make it viable. We can look for an opportunity."

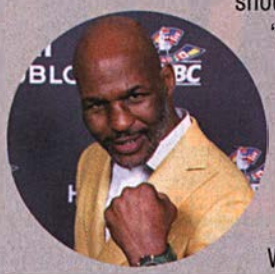
"WE ARE SURVIVORS. WE ARE THE CREATURES ON THIS EARTH THAT HAVE OVERCOME MORE THAN ANY OF GOD'S OTHER CREATURES. WE'RE GOING TO SURVIVE THIS."

— **Bernard Hopkins**

BERNARD HOPKINS,
2020 INTERNATIONAL BOXING HALL OF FAME INDUCTEE:

"The worst enemy is the one you can't see. You have a situation going on right now where I don't want to be the smartest person in the room. I can't be. I want to be the one who is learning and watching and seeing in this situation. This situation is bigger than boxing or any fight or any fighter. This is a time to reflect on your family, your friends, the people that are close to you.

"We are survivors. We are the creatures on this earth that have overcome more than any of God's other creatures. We're going to survive this. It's going to take a while. My concern doesn't lie with the 1-percenters. I don't get along with rich people. My concern is for the poor people, the blue-collar people who work every day and have to do the things that make all of our lives work and go.



Bernard Hopkins

"I haven't forgotten who I am, and this coronavirus doesn't scare me. I don't scare easy, and I'm not scared. This is a time when we shouldn't be talking about 'We miss boxing.' This is a time where we have to re-evaluate our good deeds and evil deeds. This is a time to reflect on putting aside the petty beefs you have. We have to understand what's important. What's important to me is not boxing. What's important to me are the people who are out there losing their jobs. What's important to me is what happens to the liars on TV promising things that they can't deliver. This is not the time to talk about your boats or that you have a new car or the fights you want to see or don't want to see. This is the time to talk about life. L-I-F-E. If you don't have life, you don't have boxing. You don't have the things that are important without life. Ask someone you love how they're doing. Ask someone about their dog.

"I get a chance to sit down and look at my family and make sure they're all good. That's what is important. I think this reminds us that it's important to ask your family before something like this happens again. We are the most resilient of God's creatures. We'll get through this, but life will never be the same again."

"FROM A BOXING PERSPECTIVE, I BELIEVE THERE'S GOING TO BE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR US IN THIS CRISIS. WE COULD BE THE ONLY SPORT ALIVE. WE'RE NOT IN A MAJOR LEAGUE. WE COULD BE NIMBLE ENOUGH TO DO A TV SHOW IN A STUDIO."

— **Camille Estephan**

Quotes compiled by Tom Gray, Vladimir Lik, Michael Montero, Ryan O'Hara, Ryan Songalia and Anson Wainwright.

THE LONG ROAD TO NOWHERE

BILLY JOE SAUNDERS WAS ON THE VERGE OF THE BIGGEST FIGHT OF HIS CAREER, BUT THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK HAS LEFT HIM IN LIMBO

By **Gareth A Davies**

(Inset, page 46) Billy Joe Saunders and training mate Josh Taylor set up camp in Las Vegas with coach Ben Davison in anticipation of Saunders' showdown with Canelo Alvarez. (Below) Saunders on his way to outpointing Shefat Isufi for the vacant WBO 168-pound title on May 18, 2019, in Stevenage, England.

It must have been a strange few weeks for Billy Joe Saunders before the postponement of his showdown with Canelo Alvarez, a fight that had been agreed to but had not yet been announced. Their May 2 super middleweight title bout was one of boxing's worst-kept secrets, but the confirmation of the Las Vegas event was ruined by the real enemy, COVID-19.

The virus spread greedily and ominously around the planet in the first two weeks of March, putting an 'X' through event after event, quarantining much of society and suspending the sport of boxing until who knows when.

Saunders, 30 years old and undefeated in 29 fights, has fought his way to becoming a world titleholder at 160 and 168 pounds. His standout performances have been against Andy Lee and David Lemieux. But boxing, for now, is in a state of limbo – and with it, for the time being, the opportunity for Saunders to create a real legacy.

Even without the official announcement, Saunders, who hails from a Romany Gypsy family that has lived on a Travellers' site near Hatfield, Hertfordshire, just 30 miles north of London, had taken a long

Saunders stopped Marcelo Coceres in the 11th round of his last fight on November 9 in Los Angeles.

and winding road in preparation for the Canelo fight. He sojourned first in Dubai under the auspices of trainer Ben Davison before heading to Ricky Hatton's gym in Manchester in February, then headed to Las Vegas for what would have been six weeks in camp there. But by March 18 – the day before his friend and fellow Traveller Tyson Fury was to have visited the White House by invitation – Saunders was boarding an aircraft back to the U.K.

Frustrating, was how the boxer described it, having waited weeks for the announcement that it would be him, and not fellow Brit and Ring Magazine super middleweight champ Callum Smith, who was to have faced Canelo in Sin City on the Cinco de Mayo weekend. Saunders will tell you that all he knows is boxing. It's been the "national sport" of Travellers since "Fair Fights" began. His lineage includes a great-grandfather on his mother's side, Absolom Beeney, a legendary bareknuckle champion in the traveling fairground boxing booths between the first and second World Wars.

His two sons – Billy Joe Jr. and Steve – are already into the art of sparring on the site. Saunders once bought a detached four-bedroom house in Hertfordshire to live in during his training camps but found it so unnatural, he rented it out. He went back to his caravan. Saunders told me recently: "I came from absolutely nothing. My mum and dad live on a council site. Because we do better than some and not as well as others, it doesn't make you any better or worse."

He is proud of his upbringing. He rides horses and owns a string of them, taking part in carriage-racing fairs against other Travellers. As an 18-year-old amateur welterweight representing Great Britain at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, he had said: "There's good and bad in everybody, and you can't tar all Gypsies, or Travellers, with the same brush. I just need to get out there and prove to everybody that we're not all the same."

Saunders was relishing fighting Canelo. Relishing the prospect of showing his brilliant wares – a strong, big, awkward southpaw against a boxer from Mexico who many consider to be the No. 1 pound-for-pound fighter in the world, The Ring and your correspondent among them. Hopefully, it will be rescheduled before the inevitable third fight between Canelo and Gennadiy Golovkin, rumored to be a done deal for September. How will Saunders fight Canelo? "I never thought forcing it would work. I think I needed to leave it to materialize itself.

"It's been good with Ben Davison. Me and him listen and push each other in the gym. I've worked with him a long time and I feel the training is working. I'm very happy doing what I'm doing and I can't wait to put it on display.

"Ben's far from the finished article. He's got a lot of experience for his age. He's a good trainer. What he does, he does well. We've got a good working relationship. He's very, very dedicated. He's all for his fighters, most definitely. I will give him that. He's very dedicated."

Davison, meanwhile, offered his assessment of the roustabout, having arrived back in the U.K. a day after Saunders: "The training camp in Dubai was great, with fantastic facilities at Round 10 boxing club and KO8 gym. There was great hospitality, warm weather, and it was a great 'pre camp.' We got what we needed out of that stage of camp. We then headed to Ricky Hatton's gym in Manchester for the next stage of camp. Still unsure if we would get the fight, we prepared anyway.

"The mentality we have got from Billy Joe now is that this is his job; it's a lifestyle. There's always things to work on. Still without an announcement, we headed over to Vegas. Training was going well, and then there was this virus. It's one of those things we can't do anything about."

So how have they set about preparing a plan for the Mexican redhead, the aggressive, walk-'em-down counterpuncher, a man who makes you fight, a man seemingly at the peak of his powers and hell-bent on dismantling his rivals? "Canelo is in many people's eyes the pound-for-pound number one," offered Davison. "Billy Joe wants to test himself against the best. I can only admire Canelo for what he has achieved and the fact he would be willing to fight Billy Joe. It's a great clash of styles.

"Both of them have great ring IQ. In terms of skill level, this could be one of the highest skill level fights this generation might ever see. It would be a shame if Canelo and 'GGG' were to fight next. I don't know about all that now; I think you would have to ask Eddie Hearn or MTK Global what will happen now. The world has seen Canelo-GGG fight twice. I think we know where that road leads to now. Look, Billy Joe has been world champion for five years and has been waiting for this opportunity. GGG, Canelo, Jacobs – they were all champions in that same period and they've all fought each other and there have been rematches. In my view, Billy Joe has earned his shot.

"How does he beat (Canelo)? He can't run from him. This is a fight of IQ. We have to have Billy Joe thinking one step ahead of Canelo. (Canelo is) extremely experienced; all the 'getting into his head' will not work with Canelo. It's very simple: The better fighter will win. Both fighters and teams are experienced. Like I said, Billy Joe has been a world champion for a long period, and he's fought big punchers, smart boxers. I've been involved in big fights over in the United States. I know how things work here, and obviously Canelo and the Reynosos have been here many, many times before. There's not much else to it, other than the fighter who is better prepared and smarter on the night will win."

A brilliant boxer, Saunders has been in the blaze of bad publicity at times. In the buildup to his fight for the WBO title against Andy Lee – set for Ireland but later taking place in Manchester – it was proposed that Katie Taylor could appear on the undercard. When Saunders was asked for his thoughts on women's boxing, he said, "I think women are there for sex every night, hard sex. Cleaning, cooking, washing and sex. They're not there to put on headgear and get punched. That's my opinion on women, but I'm just a sex maniac."

There have been other episodes, and Saunders now claims, in his own words, to have "greater maturity" in life as a boxer and athlete, and that he has been able to narrow his excesses under Davison (though a tasteless prank call to Delta Airlines in mid-March about a passenger with COVID-19 suggests that there is still a long way to go). When, or if, the fight against Canelo materializes after this insidious disease is finally curbed, Saunders, like his friend Fury, will have to muster all of the desire, determination and boxing DNA inside him to head to America and make history.

Gareth A Davies is boxing correspondent of the London Telegraph.

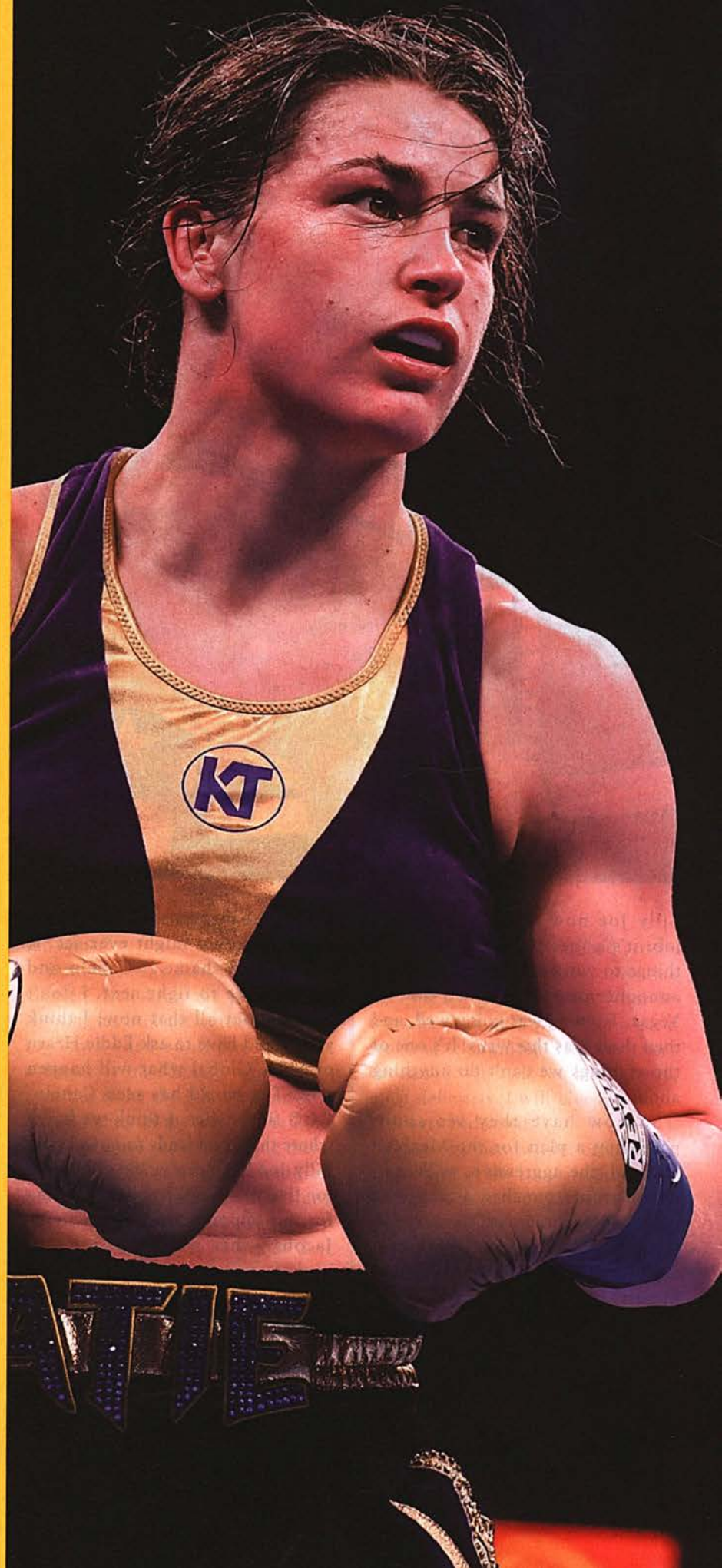
BEST VS. BEST

UNDISPUTED LIGHTWEIGHT CHAMPION **KATIE TAYLOR** AND SEVEN-DIVISION TITLEHOLDER **AMANDA SERRANO** ARE SET TO SQUARE OFF IN A LONG-AWAITED SUPERFIGHT

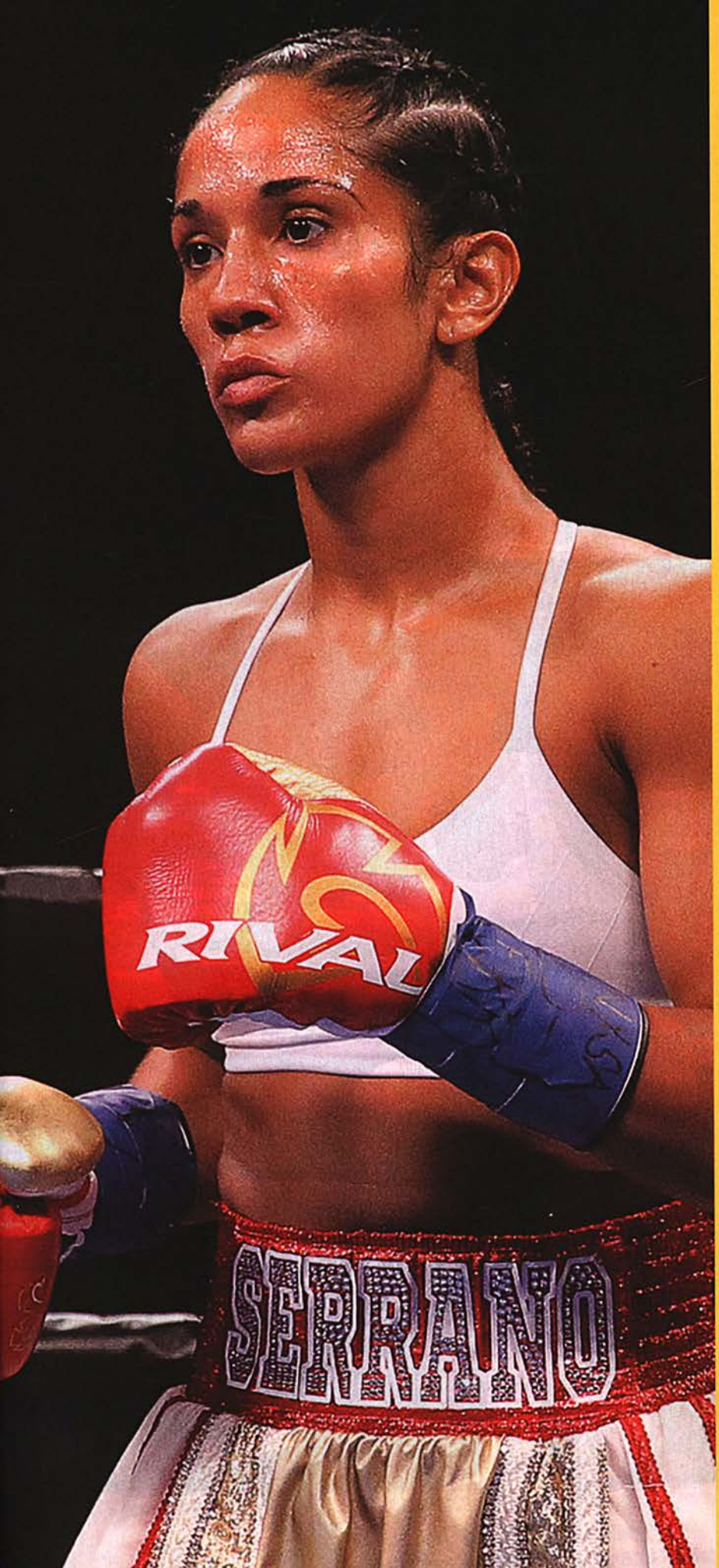
By **Thomas Gerbasi**

There's been no shortage of debates on the differences between men's and women's boxing. Yet one key similarity is that fans often can't have nice things. Lennox Lewis never got to fight Riddick Bowe. Christy Martin never faced Lucia Rijker. And in modern times, a fight between Errol Spence and Terence Crawford appears to be stuck in a permanent holding pattern.

A women's superfight between two-division champion Katie Taylor and Amanda Serrano seemed destined for the fistic "What If" bin as well, especially with Taylor moving up



Katie Taylor and Amanda Serrano are among the top five of the women's pound-for-pound rankings.



to 140 pounds to win her second divisional title last November while Serrano threatened a return to mixed martial arts after the Taylor fight fell by the wayside.

But in early March, seemingly out of nowhere, Matchroom Boxing's Eddie Hearn announced that the long-awaited bout for the undisputed lightweight championship was heading to Manchester, England, on May 2. Of course, the coronavirus pandemic has put all boxing in the near future on shaky ground, but at press time, Taylor vs. Serrano at Manchester Arena was a go, and the combatants couldn't be happier.

"I think any time you get the best fighting the best, then that's something that should get the fans excited," said Ireland's Taylor. "Most boxing fans just appreciate good matchups, regardless of gender, and in this case you are getting the best against the best and one of the biggest fights that can be made in the sport. It's been talked about for so long now, and I'm grateful that it's finally happening."

"We've been going hard at the gym, but now it's finalized," said Serrano. "So it's a relief, because now we have a time and place, and I'm just excited. I've been training hard, and now you just go in the gym and train even harder."

At least these days, Brooklyn's Serrano can focus on boxing and not have to worry about getting kicked or caught in armbars. That's always a possibility when training for MMA bouts, but it's a risk Serrano (1-0-1 in the sport) has taken in search of greener financial pastures while still trying to get the big fights in boxing. The Taylor fight, though, may mark a full-time return to the sweet science.

"I have to give it my all, so I can't be playing around with jiu-jitsu or kicking and get hurt," she said. "I'm full-time with boxing, and after this,

The Taylor-Serrano lightweight championship is slated for May 2 in England, for the time being.

we have a rematch clause, so we'll see what happens. I do like MMA, but for right now I'm concentrating on this fight."

You would assume that a fighter who has won world titles in seven weight classes while compiling a 38-1-1 (28 KOs) record wouldn't have to look to other sports to get paid what she deserves, but this is still the state of women's boxing despite promoter Lou DiBella's best efforts on Serrano's behalf.

But then former Olympic medalists like Taylor and Claressa Shields entered the pro game and raised the bar both financially and in terms of attention. That's a fact not lost on Serrano's trainer, manager and brother-in-law, Jordan Maldonado.

"I'm glad there are girls like Katie Taylor and Claressa Shields," said Maldonado. "They brought awareness and money to this sport. All of this is happening because of Katie Taylor and Claressa Shields. (Women's boxing) has been around for a long time, but never at this level and at this magnitude."

Yet despite coming into the sport with plenty of acclaim, Taylor and Shields have not shied away from challenges. Taylor, in particular, has specialized in continually raising the bar. She defeated Jessica McCaskill in 2017 and then picked up wins in 2018 over Eva Wahlstrom and Serrano's sister, Cindy. Her 2019 campaign saw her win three fights, highlighted by the Fight of the Year against Delfine Persoon, which earned her the inaugural Ring women's lightweight championship. Most recently, Taylor moved up to 140 pounds to take Christina Linardatou's title.

Now it's Serrano.

"I've always relished the biggest challenges because I know that's what's going to bring out the best in me," said Taylor, 15-0 (6 KOs) as a pro and The Ring's 2019 Female Fighter of the Year. "I've never really found motivation or burnout an issue, though, because I'm getting to live the life of my dreams and I truly love what I do. Of course you have days in training camp where you are homesick or it's more of a struggle than others, but those are the days when it's even more important to push through and put in the work."

Taylor's work rate extends from her training camp in Connecticut with trainer Ross Enamait to the ring, and her key to victory is to keep the punches coming in a fast and furious fashion to prevent Serrano from getting into a rhythm. As for the 31-year-old Serrano, the be-all and end-all is always her fight-altering power, one of the most potent weapons in women's boxing.

"I think every opponent presents their own challenges, and Amanda's no different," said Taylor. "She's an aggressive southpaw and has a reputation as an explosive puncher. She's obviously very experienced and has jumped around the weights winning world titles, so it's a big challenge for me, but it's one that I'm relishing and very, very

Serrano halted Simone Aparecida Da Silva in three one-sided rounds on January 30 in Miami.

Taylor edged Delfine Persoon in one of the best fights of 2020.

confident about."

The confidence to withstand Serrano's power shots may come from the fact that the New Yorker, who has won titles from 115 to 140 pounds, is coming up from her preferred weight of 122-126 pounds, presumably dulling her knockout blows. But a look at her record shows that her bouts in the lightweight division have produced three knockouts in as many fights. Serrano is still keeping things close to the vest when asked if lightweight is her best division.

"No, I actually like 122, 126," she said. "I feel comfortable at that weight. But my power goes up and down with me. At 135, I won the WBO title by knockout, so the power goes up and down. But I prefer featherweight, where I'm still the champion. But I don't care. I'll fight wherever it makes sense."

Maldonado disagrees, saying that at lightweight, his fighter is even scarier, despite the fact that she walks around at 138 pounds.

"I would say yes for the simple fact that she's able to train super hard and able to eat," he said. "And her punching power doesn't leave her and that's natural; that's not something we train in the gym. 135 is a great weight for Amanda."

Sounds like what every superfight should be – an evenly matched bout between two fighters at the height of their powers. But what of Serrano taking her show on the road to the U.K.? Can she get a fair shake in a close fight in Europe? She's not concerned. In fact, despite losing her only pro bout in Sweden to Frida Wallberg in 2012, she says she requested the Taylor fight to happen close to the champion's backyard.

"We had a choice to fight either in New York or the U.K., and I decided to fight in the U.K.," Serrano said. "I'm a true champion, and we're working so that we don't leave no doubts in the judges' minds. And the good thing is that it is on DAZN and people are gonna be able to see it, so whatever happens, happens. There are gonna be no excuses from me; I know what I'm getting myself into. I have to be mentally prepared, especially for this fight, and I am, so I know what I'm up for. But you'll hear no excuses from me if anything happens."

Here's hoping the fighters settle matters with their fists without the judges or the crowd becoming the post-fight story. That's the plan for Serrano ... and Taylor.

"I don't think the venue itself matters all that much, to be honest," said Taylor. "I fought all over the world as an amateur, and I've been lucky enough to fight on some huge events in some of the best venues in the world as a pro. Whether you are fighting in a big stadium or a small hall, a boxing ring is still a boxing ring. And when the bell goes, it's just you, your opponent and the referee in there."

The way it ought to be.

"It's a great fight, and these girls need each other," said Maldonado. "In order to make a superfight, you need two great fighters. We are grateful that we're getting the opportunity to prove that we're great. Katie Taylor needed us because that's the fight everybody wants. And they've wanted it for years."

TAYLOR: STEPHEN MCCARTHY/SPORTSFILE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Edwin Valero in happier times, following a first-round KO of Aram Ramazyan in December 2005 in Paris. Prior to regaining a license to box in the U.S., he fought abroad five times in 2005, including his Japan debut.

BERSERKER

A NEW BOOK ABOUT **EDWIN VALERO** SHOWS A HIGHLY GIFTED BUT VOLATILE FIGHTER CAREENING TOWARD DISASTER

By **Don Stradley**

When Hamilcar Publications offered me the opportunity to write a book about Edwin Valero, such an assignment was akin to capturing a tornado in a paper cup. Not only was his short life packed with controversy, but also I gradually learned there were two ways to interpret Valero. There was the American version, based on his days in L.A. when only a handful of internet reporters and the most hardcore of West Coast fans knew him. And there was Venezuela's version, where he was an icon. The irony is that America picked up on Valero first, when he was merely a gym rat trying to make his name in California. Venezuela took hardly any notice of him until he won his first title belt. Then, overnight, Valero became a star in his country.

After his wife, Jennifer, was found murdered in their hotel room and Valero subsequently hanged himself in a Venezuelan prison cell, the American press quickly wrote him off as a monster. In Venezuela, the story had a more tragic feel, in that a national hero had come to a terrible end. While researching the book, I contacted many Venezuelans – fighters, lawyers, doctors – who may have been helpful. Most didn't wish to participate. My guess is that they're protective of Valero's legacy, or perhaps confused by it, and didn't care to assist some American author. I understood. I wrote the book anyway.

One of the more interesting aspects of Valero's career was that a head injury from a motorcycle crash got him banned from fighting in America. As a result, he fought many bouts in Japan for the veteran promoter Akihiko Honda. The following excerpt from Berserk: The Shocking Life and Death of Edwin Valero *touches on his time in Japan. This was a period when he enjoyed a rock star type of popularity. This was also when the cracks in his personality began to show...*

January 3, 2007: Valero is in Tokyo at the Ariake Coliseum, a venue shaped like a flying saucer with seating for 10,000. The new year is barely awake, but he's defending his title against Michael Lozada. Valero knocks him down twice. Lozada tries to continue, but his equilibrium is off. He looks like he's just stepped off a carnival ride. Referee Rafael Ramos stops the bout at 1:12 of the first.

"Honda had asked Valero to carry Lozada for a few rounds," recalled Doug Fischer. "I ran into Valero in the lobby on the day of the fight. I said, 'Are you going to carry him?' Valero said, 'No. I feel too good.' That's how he was."

May 3, 2007: Same city. Same location. Valero is defending against the esteemed Japanese 130-pound national champ, Nobuhito Honmo. Valero uses his right jab more than usual. He's working in a different key. He's methodical. By the eighth, Honmo's face is a mess, like he's been attacked with gardening shears. The ringside doctor suggests the fight be stopped.

Honmo never fights again.

After the bout, Valero is seen holding a small doll. It belongs to Edwin Jr. It's a likeness of his country's president, Hugo Chávez. It is the bestselling 'Chavecito' ('Little Chávez') toy.

December 15, 2007: At the Plaza de Toros in Cancun, Mexico, Valero takes on Zaid Zavaleta, a young Mexican fighter known as "The Exterminator." Zavaleta survives a first-round knockdown. He tries some roughhousing in the second; nothing works. Third round: Valero clubs Zavaleta with a right to the jaw. Zavaleta sags. Referee (Luis) Pabon stops the action at 1:18 of round three. Valero howls. He spits his mouthpiece out and dropkicks it into the audience, sending someone home with a wet souvenir.

It was a nice way to end the year. Three fights. Three wins. Easy money. He was at the top of his game.

Valero worked hard to sell himself in Japan. He held open workouts at the Teiken Gym in Tokyo. He told a Japanese reporter that he wanted to be "an adopted son of the Japanese people." He said he'd only fight in America because that's where the money was. He wanted American fans to see his booming punch.

"I know the crowd loves knockouts," Valero said. "It's like hitting a home run or getting a goal in a soccer game."

In between fights, Valero had helped Marco Antonio Barrera prepare for his second bout with (Manny) Pacquiao, serving as Barrera's sparring partner and playing the role of southpaw. He'd once done the same for Erik Morales.

"Working with these guys is a

wonderful assessment tool for me," Valero said. "It lets me know how I match up against the best in the world. At the same time, I get the opportunity to see how they prepare and compare it to my training regimen."

Unfortunately for Valero, that same year saw him involved in a parking lot skirmish near the Racing Bar, a popular nightclub near Caracas. Reports circulated that Venezuela's young champion had been disfigured.

He spoke to the press immediately.

"First of all," Valero said, "I was attacked. I had not been in a nightclub for seven years and one evening, on an impulse, I decided to go with my wife. So we left our children with my brother and went to the club. I went as far as changing my look and disguising myself when I went to the club, as not to draw attention. When the night was over and the club was letting out, someone snatched my cellphone. I guess they liked it, since I had brought it to Venezuela from Japan. Anyways, I guess I was then hit with a bottle or a glass, I do not know. Security intervened and that is it. These papers say I was disfigured, which is not true. I did get a cut on my forehead, but it is nothing major."

Valero's supporters were concerned. Was he in the vicinity of his old gang members? Perhaps it was dangerous for him to be back in Venezuela.

Many around Valero noticed an increase in his temper. He was surly. He blamed it on training. He hated having to lose weight and go without his favorite foods. During the days before a fight, he couldn't eat anything except chewing gum.

He'd even broken from his longtime trainer, Jorge Zerpa. The argument had been over the best way to wrap Valero's hands, but Zerpa had noticed Valero was changing. Valero had always been serious in the gym. Now, he'd suddenly interrupt a session to call Hugo Chávez. Sometimes the fighter and the president would talk on the phone for an hour, keeping Zerpa and the sparring partners waiting.

Valero was also drinking more than ever. He'd developed his own favorite concoction – a mouthful of Viagra washed down with tequila. He'd also go days without bathing, out of concern that his body might retain bathwater and make him seem heavier on the scales.

The eccentricities were piling up.

In the early summer of 2008, Valero was fighting at the Tokyo Budokan, the revered 14,471-seat venue that has hosted everyone from The Beatles to Led Zeppelin to Muhammad Ali. Valero's challenger, Takehiro Shimada, was an experienced 36-year-old, but after being drilled by a few of Valero's lefts, he decided to survive each round by clinching or moving around the ring.

At one point in the seventh, after being hit with several hard punches, Shimada went to the ropes and assumed a kneeling position. When the referee hesitated, Valero threw a right to Shimada's head, sending the Japanese challenger into a full sprawl. It was ungentlemanly, hitting a man who seemed to be surrendering, but legal. Duran or Tyson would have done the same. Shimada beat the 10-count, but he looked utterly defeated. The fight was over. It was the first time Shimada had ever been stopped.

Though Valero relied too much on his vaunted left cross, he fought a measured, calculating fight against Shimada. By now he was working

(Opposite page) Valero displays the Venezuelan flag and a Hugo Chavez doll after a Tokyo title bout.

with trainer Kenny Adams, an experienced boxing man who had served as head coach for the 1988 American Olympic team. Adams would recall Valero as "a jewel to work with," adding, "We had to get 150-pounders for him to work with, because he was brutal."

Adams did, however, experience Valero's unruly side.

"He drank a little bit, which was kind of a problem," Adams said. "He was 'viva loco,' or something like that. In Mexico once, he grabbed me and started choking me. I said, 'You'd better let me go, or I'm gonna bust you.' He said, 'OK, Kenny, my friend, my friend.' He was like that. I don't know what it was. He definitely had that streak in him."

St. Louis cruiserweight Ryan Coyne was in several of Valero's training camps during the Adams era. He remembers Valero as both bizarre and awe-inspiring, an athlete who cared nothing about nutrition and "gave zero fucks about what he put into his body," a fighter who eschewed regular training routines yet could always outperform everyone else in the gym.

"Edwin was otherworldly," Coyne said. "He was a world champion drinker. When he sparred, you could smell it on him; the alcohol oozed from his pores. And Edwin never drank water. We'd run six miles, and he'd have four scalding hot black coffees."

Valero spoke only a bit of English, but he could express himself with facial gestures and body language. "I liked being around him," said Coyne. "He was friendly. Charismatic. He didn't like taking orders, but he wasn't a mean guy. I've never known a more intense person. I remember him pounding on a table, saying that George Bush had sent helicopters to kill Chávez. When he pounded on a table, he got your attention. He could punch through walls.

"I thought there was something unreal about Edwin. The way he'd drink all night and then come in and train; it's like he was possessed by a devil. I don't want to sound like I'm demonizing him, because I don't mean it that way. I'm not religious, really. I know how weird this sounds, but sometimes I'd watch him and think humans couldn't be that way. There was something supernatural."

Valero was especially unusual in the way he ran. "He was a hard runner," Coyne said. "Even if he'd been drinking all night, he'd just run everybody's dicks into the ground. I could never catch him. I asked him, 'How do you run like that?' Edwin said, 'When you run, you have to run like the police are chasing you, and if they get you, you'll never get out of jail, and you'll never breathe fresh air again.' I'll never forget when he said that. It stayed with me, to this day."

Despite another easy win in Japan, Valero's critics were getting louder. The faultfinders debated whether he should've been disqualified for hitting Shimada while he was kneeling. All agreed that the lineup of limp challengers was getting stale.

Valero's supporters, however, wouldn't bow to the finicky voices on the Internet. After all, they'd waited a long time for a fighter like Valero.

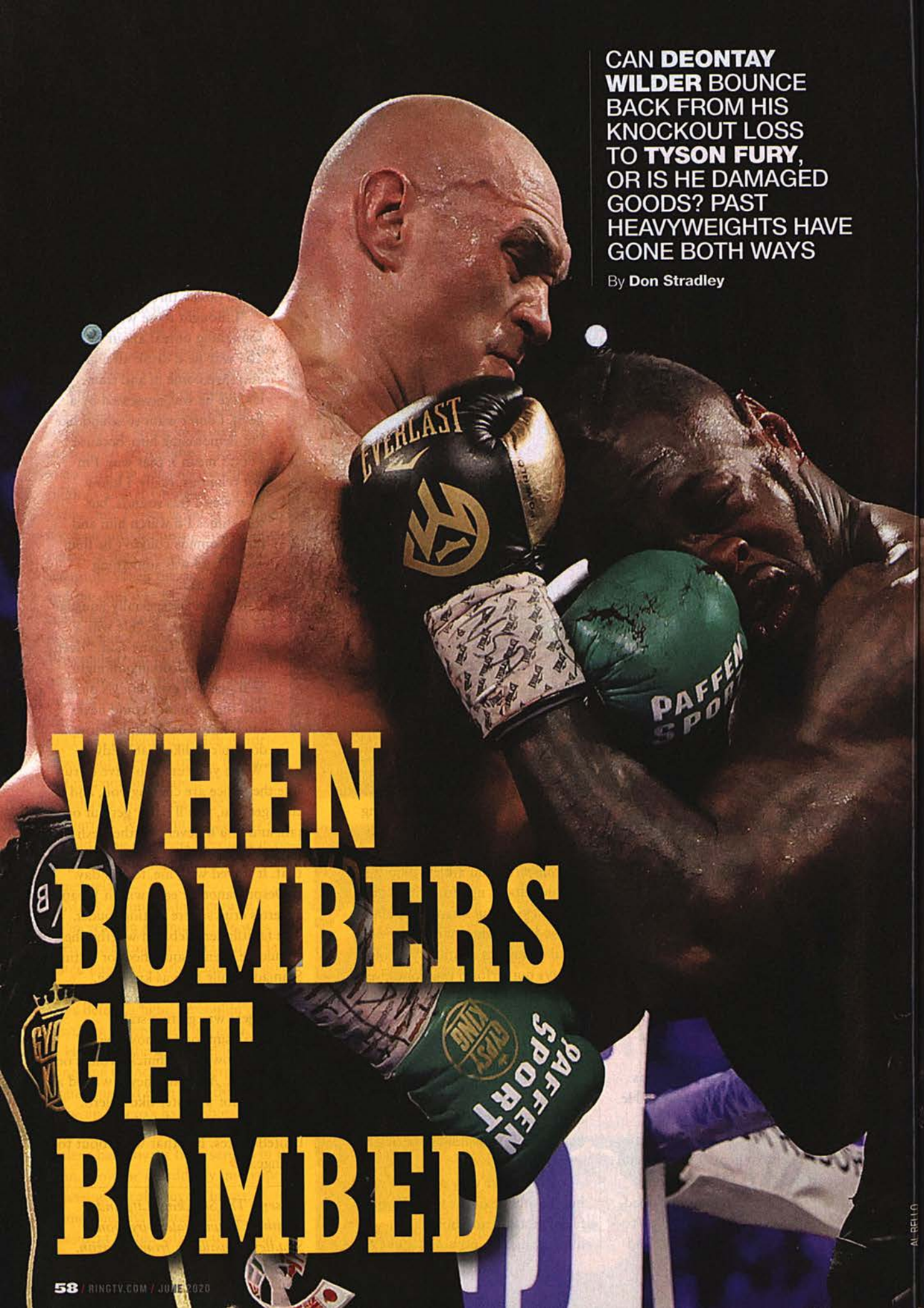
He still couldn't fight in the United States. But that was about to change.RNG

Berserk: The Shocking Life and Death of Edwin Valero by Don Stradley is available from Amazon.

WHEN BOMBERS GET BOMBED

CAN **DEONTAY WILDER** BOUNCE BACK FROM HIS KNOCKOUT LOSS TO **TYSON FURY**, OR IS HE DAMAGED GOODS? PAST HEAVYWEIGHTS HAVE GONE BOTH WAYS

By **Don Stradley**



AL BELLO

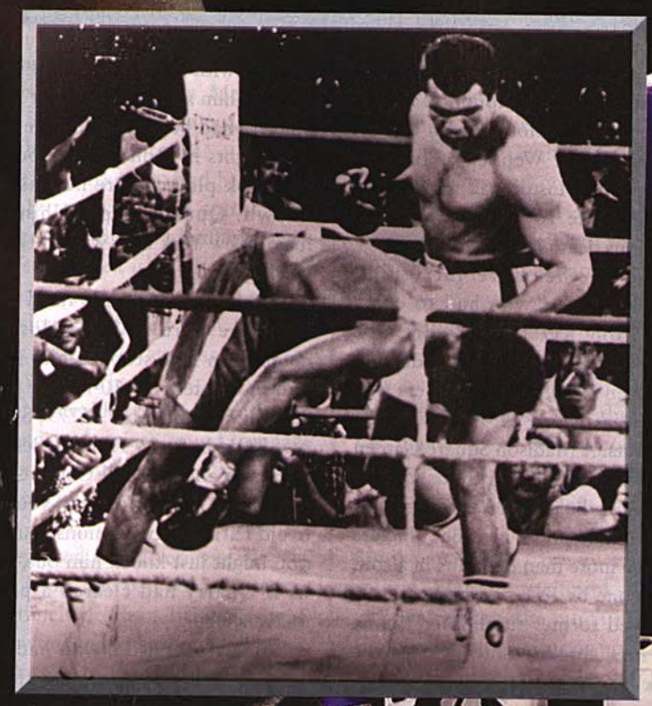
Nothing makes the boxing business hum like the unexpected. And few things are as unexpected as the sight of a brutal, scary puncher finding himself on the other side of a beating. So it's not a shock that Deontay Wilder's recent loss to Tyson Fury was treated as such a landmark event.

Maybe it was inevitable. Wilder had looked highly beatable in two of his last three fights. His one-round knockout of Dominic Breazeale in Brooklyn was sandwiched in-between his first bout with Fury, where Wilder struggled and needed two knockdowns to get a draw, and a seventh-round KO of Luis Ortiz where he lost nearly every round before landing his moneymaker. The Fury rematch saw Wilder losing every round again. Wilder probably thought his right hand would bail him out as it had in the past, but with each passing round, he began to resemble the hopeless defenders of the Alamo as they were being gutted by Santa Anna's army.

By the seventh, when trainer Mark Breland tossed in a towel to prevent Wilder from taking more punishment, the skeptics threw open their windows (or turned to Twitter) and howled that Wilder had never really learned how to box and that the hype machine behind his vaunted power could finally be silenced. Most of this, however, is beside the point. Fury's new trainer, Javan Hill (aka SugarHill Steward), had simply instilled in Fury an old Kronk Gym principle that had been favored by his late uncle Emanuel: Bully the bully. From the opening bell, Fury had leaned on Wilder, mauled him, shoved him. At times it looked more like a hockey fight than a boxing match.

The upshot is that "The Bronze Bomber" got bombed, and now we get to watch how he responds. If the past can teach us anything, Wilder will either figure out what went wrong and redeem himself or go into a messy freefall. When a big-punching heavyweight sees that first "KO'd by" on his record, he may need anything from a new trainer to a new address.

George Foreman had a hard time dealing with his stoppage loss to Muhammad Ali (inset) but the legendary puncher eventually got over it. Can Deontay Wilder do the same?



With devastating KO wins over both Joe Frazier and Ken Norton, the George Foreman of 1974 was as foreboding as any heavyweight champion in history. When he and Muhammad Ali were set to fight in Africa, more than a few experts thought Ali was heading toward certain doom, possibly death. Of course, Ali had a plan. He stayed on the ropes and survived Foreman's onslaught until the big banger was exhausted. When George appeared ready to drop, Ali landed a sharp right hand in the eighth that made Foreman spin to the canvas like a downed helicopter. And just like that, Foreman was an ex-champion with a less-than-invincible image.

Foreman's next ring appearance was an indication of his mental state. On April 26, 1975, before an audience of 5,500 at Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens and viewers watching on ABC's Wide World of Sports, Foreman took on five opponents in one afternoon. With Ali heckling from ringside, five well-meaning journeymen took their turns with Foreman. He snarled, threw haymakers and thumped his chest like a carnival strongman. A few of the guys fell. One of them tried to kiss Foreman. (The "fearsome fivesome," as they were called, consisted of Boone Kirkman, Charlie Polite, Jerry Judge, Terry Daniels and Alonzo Johnson.) The Don King farce did nothing for Foreman's reputation. The general impression was that the former champ had been humiliated in Africa and was desperate for approval. "Foreman," wrote UPI sports editor Milton Richman, "seems deeply confused now." ABC's Howard Cosell suggested Foreman needed psychiatric help. Foreman returned to boxing in earnest in 1976 and won his next five bouts by KO, but a decision loss to the light-punching Jimmy Young in 1977 sent him into retirement. He'd found religion, but some cynics felt his holy sabbatical from boxing was just an extension of the odd behavior he'd shown since the loss to Ali.

WHEN BOMBERS GET BOMBED

In 1987 at age 38, Foreman launched one of the most unlikely comebacks in fight history. To his enormous credit, he took part in some of the more memorable heavyweight fights of the 1990s, even regaining the championship, and was never KO'd again. He'd become a more thoughtful, tactical fighter. Even his personality changed, from menacing to lovable. It took him many years, but count Foreman as one heavyweight who learned a lot from his first KO loss.

No less than Mike Tyson found his future altered after Buster Douglas knocked him out in Tokyo in 1990. True, he still made buckets of money, but Tyson's post-Tokyo era was marked more by his erratic behavior than great boxing. Other factors played into his unraveling, but the loss to Douglas was certainly a turning point. If nothing else, seeing him defeated in such a manner made Tyson seem more human. Future opponents, the good ones, would be less intimidated than they might have been before Douglas trounced him. By the end of Tyson's career, he'd been knocked out four more times. Prior to the Douglas bout, such a thought was inconceivable.

Long before Foreman and Tyson had their identities shaken by knockout losses, Sonny Liston found his career in shreds after losing the heavyweight championship by a bizarre stoppage against Ali. In February 1964, Liston stunned a Miami crowd by quitting on his stool after six rounds. A year later, Liston's reputation sank even further when Ali stopped him in one round with the so-called "phantom punch." Liston went into seclusion for more than a year, partly because promoters wouldn't touch him.

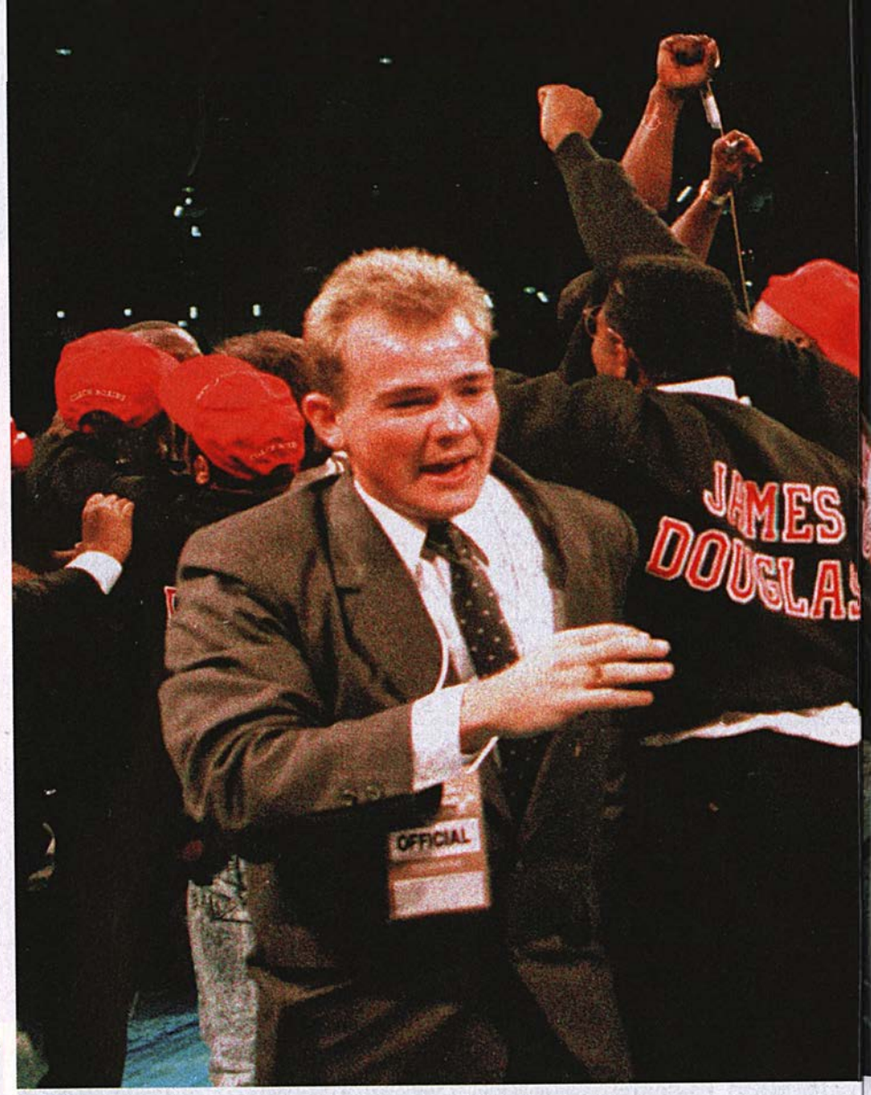
Liston resurfaced in July of 1966, taking a series of fights in Sweden. By 1968, he was back in America, rebuilding his career by beating obscure journeymen in low-profile locations. He no longer seemed devastating, but he managed to win 14 in a row. That is, until December of '69, when Leotis Martin knocked him cold at 1:08 of Round 9. Liston returned for one more bout, a bloody TKO of Chuck Wepner in June of '70. Any plans Liston had to continue boxing came to a halt with his mysterious death later that year.

Some of the more intriguing knockout artists who had to come back from KO losses were not champions, but merely contenders. In December 1973, Earnie Shavers was sporting a record of 45-2, with 44 knockouts. A Madison Square Garden bout with veteran Jerry Quarry was expected to be another easy night for him. At that point in time, Shavers had won more than 30 bouts in a row, all but one by KO, and had recently destroyed former titleholder Jimmy Ellis in a single round. But to the shock of ringsiders, Quarry caught Shavers with a storm of punches and stopped him at 2:21 of the first round. Shavers had been KO'd in one of his early fights by Ron Stander, but that one took place before he was well-known. Quarry stopped him in a major New York fight with the boxing world watching.

Shavers remained a top-rated fighter, but there were more KO losses to come. Ron Lyle stopped him in '75, and in one terrible 10-month period starting in September of '79, Shavers was KO'd by Larry Holmes, Bernardo Mercado and Randall Cobb. Quarry had taught the world that if you could avoid Earnie Shavers' monstrous shot, you might just knock him out. It was as if Quarry had cleared a path to Shavers' chin.

Tommy Morrison, who had left a trail of flattened opponents behind him, suffered a horrific fifth-round stoppage loss to Ray Mercer in 1991. Skeptics had always dismissed burly blond Morrison as a product of careful marketing, and he seemed unlikely to recover his status after Mercer had demolished him. Yet Morrison stayed in the heavyweight mix for a few more years, even scoring a decision over Foreman in 1993 for the vacant (and little-regarded at the time) WBO title. A first-round KO loss to unheralded Michael Bentt soon followed, and a sixth-round stoppage loss to Lennox Lewis in 1995 ended Morrison's stint as a legit contender. Sadly, Morrison's personal life disintegrated into a series of arrests, health issues and bad behavior before his untimely death in 2013 at age 44. Many wondered if his downfall began with the loss to Mercer.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of a heavyweight knockout puncher's failure to recover from a KO loss would be Gerry Cooney. Only three of 25 opponents had gone the distance with him (in four- and eight-rounders) prior to his June 11, 1982, bout with heavyweight champion Larry Holmes. Cooney was competitive, but Holmes punched his way to a stoppage win at 2:52 of Round 13. The humbled Cooney vanished for two years, blaming his absence on bad management, boxing politics and family trouble. Fighting only three times from 1984 to 1986, he emerged from a yearlong layoff to face Michael Spinks in 1987. Cooney crumbled in five. Blaming the Spinks loss on various factors, the much-maligned Cooney made one last ring appearance in 1990. This time he was KO'd in two by Foreman. Perhaps Foreman could've counseled Cooney on how to make a comeback after a KO defeat.



Mike Tyson remained a star, post-Douglas, but his mystique and confidence were shattered.

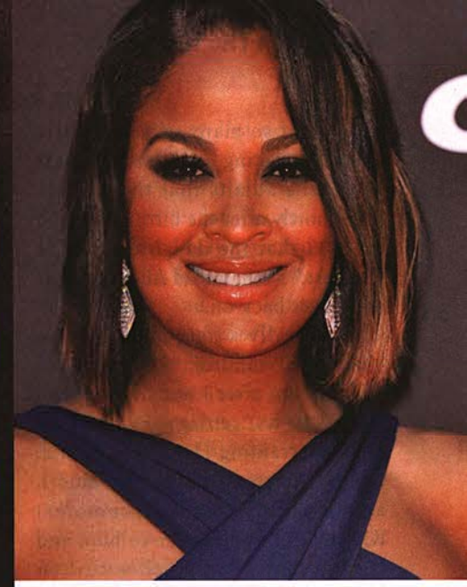
Cooney's is an extreme example. Heavyweight punchers have certainly returned from a KO loss without so much drama and turmoil. Wladimir Klitschko suffered not one but three knockout losses and went on to have one of the longest title reigns in heavyweight history. Joe Louis could've drawn up the blueprint for successful comebacks by deposed knockout artists. Already hailed as the savior of boxing, Louis was knocked out in 12 by Max Schmeling in 1936. He roared back to not only whip Schmeling in a 1938 rematch, but reigned for more than 11 years as heavyweight champion. He became an American icon in the process. It can be done.

Whether "The Bronze Bomber" can learn from "The Brown Bomber" and bounce back from his first KO loss is unknown. At 34, with a healthy bank account and more than 40 fights behind him, Wilder is probably too old and rich to follow the Joe Louis model. The most likely scenario for Wilder is a few more bouts, in hopes that his big right hand can still pull down some big money. He enacted the return bout clause in the rematch contract with Fury and is scheduled to meet his rival again this summer in Las Vegas. Brash as ever, he's already appeared on social media vowing to return "like a phoenix from the ashes." But before he does anything else, Wilder has to figure out what to do about his costumes. He's said the impressive outfit he wore into the ring, a 40-pound rig that made him look like some sort of outer space demon king, had exhausted his legs during the ring walk. That's an intriguing alibi, but it only proves one thing: You should always try something on in the store before you buy it.

RUMBLE IN THE MAKING

LAILA ALI RETIRED UNDEFEATED 13 YEARS AGO. SHE DOESN'T NEED BOXING. BUT A BEEF WITH **CLARESSA SHIELDS** COULD GET HER BACK INTO THE RING.

By **Thomas Gerbasi**



Laila Ali had us all fooled. For years after her last bout against Gwendolyn O'Neil in 2007, she did what so many fighters can't do. She moved on.

Stints on *Dancing with the Stars*, *The Masked Singer* and *The New Celebrity Apprentice*. Host of her own show, *Home Made Simple*, and *American Gladiators*. Several appearances and acting roles, as well as the most important role of all: mother of two children with her husband, Curtis Conway.

Boxing had apparently become secondary, a blip on the radar of her life. Only it wasn't. The game was in her DNA and it never left, but she wouldn't let it eat her alive, either.

"I love boxing; it's always been my first love," Ali said. "But boxing does not love me. Boxing does not love anybody. You do it while you're there and you better have something planned for when you're done, because once you're done, you're done. Luckily for me, I was always a businessperson. I had a nail salon before I started boxing. I've always been very driven and I've always been an entrepreneur, so I got back to other things that I love (after retirement). Boxing does not define me."

But it is a part of who she is, and one conversation with the 42-year-old reinforces just how much of that part is still there. As for her avoiding

the fate of so many of her peers in terms of making a comeback to the sport, she admits that there was a time shortly after the birth of her son in 2008 that the daughter of "The Greatest," Muhammad Ali, nearly put the gloves back on.

"I actually was gonna make a comeback," said Ali. "I was training at one point after I had my son, and Ann Wolfe was getting some publicity. She was training (James) Kirkland, and she started running her mouth again. I came across (promoter) Richard Schaefer, spoke to him, and he said he was in touch with Ann Wolfe and they were talking about doing a fight. I told him, 'Yeah, I'll fight her.'"

The fight everyone in boxing wanted to see even made it to the contract stage, only for Schaefer to tell Ali that Wolfe couldn't fight.

"Then why won't she just stop running her damn mouth and just stop talking about me?" said Ali. "I got really pissed about that. He took her the contracts, and when it came to sign on the line, here she comes making an excuse. I'm just tired of this story."

All these years later, it's the one pseudo-blemish on her career that Ali wants to clear up. Those in the know are already aware that if the California native was Laila Smith, this would not be an issue, but as Laila Ali, fans assume that she simply wasn't interested in marring her perfect record by facing fighters like Wolfe, Leatitia Robinson or Natascha Ragosina.

"I don't get into that conversation of 'I wish I got my recognition,'" she said. "I did what I wanted to do, which was be a world champion, go undefeated and be the best in my weight class. And that's all I can do. I didn't say I wanted people to call me the greatest female fighter of all time, because I'm never gonna rely on what other people think for my happiness. But the Ann Wolfe thing was different, because this is someone who I really wanted to fight and who the fans really wanted to see me fight, and you want to fight the best people in your weight class. I didn't get to fight her, didn't fight Leatitia Robinson, didn't get to fight Natascha Ragosina. And those girls never fought each other either, but they all want to say it's me. But why didn't you fight each other?"

And why didn't the Wolfe fight happen? Of course, it came down to money, but Ali also believes her 2003 win over Valerie Mahfood, a former Wolfe foe, played a big part in this superfight never getting made.

"When I first started, everybody was like, 'Ooh, I want to get her,' including Ann Wolfe," said Ali, who turned pro at 21 against April Fowler in October 1999. "She said she'd fight me for a hamburger. But then once she came and saw me fight Valerie Mahfood, that's when everything changed. Valerie Mahfood was the strongest fighter she ever fought, and she knocked (Wolfe) out (in 2000, a loss Wolfe later avenged). And (Wolfe) was able to see me handle (Mahfood) like it was nothing, and she was also able to see how much power I had. And I wasn't even dropping my hardest shots, though I hit her with some really hard body shots. That's when (Wolfe's) whole conversation changed. She had a change of heart when she actually saw me. You know how these bullies are, and these girls that believe their own hype. She'd rather go down in history as the woman I never fought than actually fight me. It is what it is, and there's nothing I could do about that."

And while Ali-Wolfe not happening got the most publicity, Ali believes her greatest challenge would have come from Chicago's Robinson, who went 15-1 during a career that ran from 2001 to 2009.

"Leatitia impressed me the most as a fighter," said Ali. "I always felt that she was the best in our weight

Ali's celebrity has not waned in retirement. She's been on several TV shows, including *The Masked Singer*, to the delight of host Nick Cannon.

class, outside of me. I felt like she would be my most challenging fight in terms of being in there with someone competitive that I would consider to be at the level that I'm at. Skill-wise, I felt like she was the one."

But again, despite Team Ali's best efforts – even putting Robinson on Ali's undercard in Atlanta in 2005 – the fight never happened.

"People don't realize these facts," Ali explains. "None of us were making a lot of money. I wasn't making a lot of money, either. People don't realize that. I was making more than they were, but not a lot. You get $15,000, $20,000, $25,000, that's good money for women's boxing back then. And then you win and you have all the glory. That was my bittersweet experience in boxing. That's why I retired. I was tired of it. I was tired of having to defend my titles against girls that I knew were not going to be a challenge for me. It's not inspiring. It was never because I didn't love boxing or got tired of boxing. I was tired of dealing with the opponents."

So she left it all behind at 29 years old.

"Nobody ever really got to see my best," she said. "My best happened in the boxing gyms, sparring against the guys and other world champions, male world champions. I've had the opportunity to fight with guys like Arturo Gatti, may he rest in peace, and people like that. So people didn't have the opportunity to see that stuff and what I had in my arsenal. I didn't just train with Roger Mayweather, Floyd Mayweather, Buddy McGirt and the other trainers that I had and not learn anything. I just never had the opportunity to use it."

Regardless, Ali left the ring perfect at 24-0 with 21 knockouts, and as the owner of the WBC super middleweight title and several lesser belts at 168 and 175 pounds. It was a legacy she could be proud of. Call it boxing's version of a mic drop.

Until earlier this year, when Ali made it clear that she is willing to pick that mic back up again.

Yes. It's true. But there's more to this, and it's not a publicity stunt when it comes to Ali possibly facing Claressa Shields.

"She's an interesting young lady," chuckled Ali. "The story is that Claressa called me out multiple times, starting back in 2018. I ignored her and didn't say anything publicly; that's why it kind of went under the radar. But as soon as I say something, that's when people really start to pay attention."

Ali, a master of gamesmanship like her father, can be as subtle or direct as she wants with her comments, depending on her mood. But while the fire is evident when it comes to the idea of an improbable, out-of-the-blue comeback, she also wants to make it clear that deeper issues have her considering stepping through the ropes again, 13 years after her last fight.

"It's unfortunate that things turned the way that they did," said Ali. "She reached out to me for advice when she first won the Olympics and, of course, I gladly gave it to her."

Impressed by a young lady who went on to win two Olympic gold medals in 2012 and 2016, as well as several pro titles, Ali tried to get Shields' name out there in support

Ali and Shields were cordial onstage at the 37th Annual Salute To Women In Sports gala in 2016.

In her 16th pro fight, Ali knocked out women's boxing trailblazer Christy Martin in the fourth round.

CHRIS GRAYTHEN

whenever she could. But as the years went on, Ali felt the tone of Shields' comments changed whenever her name came up.

"A friend of mine sent me a link to a video where she's sitting next to (MMA star Cris) Cyborg and someone said, 'What would happen if you and Laila Ali fought?' I already knew what she was gonna say, but that's OK. She's supposed to feel that way, and I have no problem with that. But before she answered the question, she said, 'Well, first of all, I don't look up to Laila Ali as a fighter; I look up to her as a businesswoman.' So for her to say that, that she didn't respect me as a fighter, I heard that and said I'm no longer gonna support her."

And that was that, until Ali was later asked about women's boxing on the *Breakfast Club* radio show, and in the January 2018 interview, she said a return to the ring wasn't happening.

"I said there's nobody there who inspires me, nobody that I think would give me a challenge. That's just how I feel. (Shields) saw that and puts out a public video saying that I disrespected her. It was how I feel, and I have the right to feel that way, and when I say inspired, I'm talking about the opponent, the purse, the whole situation. In her mind, that was disrespect. So she called me out and then started speaking negatively about me publicly."

The talk-show battles continued, reaching a peak with an ESPN spot by Ali during the Tyson Fury-Deontay Wilder fight week in February, and by then, the ball was rolling full-speed ahead. Ali had her inspiration once more. But can she pull this off?

"I live a healthy lifestyle and I'm in great shape. Of course, I'm not in fight shape, but I can take the time and get into shape, and it would be a great opportunity for women's boxing and a great opportunity for me. That's the most important thing, because I am the one that would have to train and have the desire and work hard and actually get in shape to fight. And that's all I'd have to do, because I can totally look at her and see all the many ways that I can take her apart. It's unfortunate, because she's worked so hard for all of this and it's so important to her, and I'm the person that she said she wanted to beat. She wanted to replace me, and for me to come into the ring and take everything that she worked for over the years in one swoop, that would be devastating to her. And I will absolutely do it. It will be my pleasure."

You can almost see the smile through the phone line, and it's clear that despite all her success in her post-ring career, there's just something about boxing that still gets a fire burning in the belly of "She Bee Stingin'."

"I've always been a fighter and I always will be a fighter," Ali said. "I did have my time, and I was totally fine. Just don't forget who started it, who called me out, who woke me up. Right now, I am at an age where I can come back. So, if it's gonna happen, it needs to happen now and the money has to be right. I'm aware of the value of the fight that I bring. I'm aware of the value that we both can bring, and I'm aware that because of the audience outside of boxing I bring that it becomes an event, not just a boxing match. Everything's there except the deal. There's a possibility of some things happening, but it's not done until it's done. But it's real. It can definitely happen."

WORLD BEAT

Controversy has renewed over a drug test dating back to Tyson Fury's 2015 fight against Christian Hammer.

U.K.

BY GARETH A DAVIES

Tyson Fury could be the subject of a U.K. Anti-Doping investigation into a 2017 drug sanction settlement with the boxer after Martin Carefoot, a farmer, claimed he had lied about supplying meat to Fury. The legal team for Fury and his cousin, Hughie, who received retroactive two-year bans after testing positive for the banned steroid nandrolone in 2015, had blamed the levels on eating uncastrated wild boar or contaminated supplements.

Carefoot's evidence to UKAD came through Fury's legal team, but the boxer himself says he never met the farmer. The news broke just weeks after Fury became the toast of the sporting world following his defeat of Deontay Wilder in Las Vegas.

In March, Carefoot made allegations in The Mail on Sunday newspaper that he was offered £25,000 to concoct a story that he supplied Fury meat on a regular basis. The claims were passed to the boxer's lawyers at Morgan Sports Law, who gave them to the anti-doping investigators. Both Furys insisted to UKAD at the time that they "never knowingly or deliberately committed a violation" and were allowed to resume their boxing careers from December 2017 after accepting backdated two-year doping bans.

Meanwhile, Frank Warren, Fury's promoter, dismissed Carefoot as a "fantasist." Warren claimed Carefoot had written to him last year and he had told him to pursue his complaint through official channels to UKAD. Responding to the report, Warren said the farmer "has got to be lying about something, because if he's telling the truth now, he committed perjury last time."

Warren said the farmer's letter to the promoter in October said: "I have never told as many lies in my life … I made sworn statements to the barrister and really put my neck on the line." When Warren rang him to ask about the claims, Carefoot is then alleged to have asked for £25,000.

Both Tyson and Hughie Fury were not charged by UKAD until June 2016. In the meantime, Tyson won the Ring, WBA, WBO and IBF heavyweight titles from Wladimir Klitschko. Since Fury's return in June 2018, he has been one of the stories of the sport, from his dramatic weight loss to defeating mental health issues. Mauricio Sulaiman, president of the WBC, whose belt Fury won from Wilder on February 22, said that the allegations would have "no impact" on his reign as champion.

★★★

Patience and resilience are virtues that super heavyweight boxer Frazer Clarke has mastered in the past decade as a member of the GB Boxing squad. He had to watch as understudy and sparring partner

to Anthony Joshua and then Joe Joyce, who claimed gold and silver respectively at the Olympic Games in 2012 and 2016.

The resilience came when he had to recover from being stabbed in the neck and leg four years ago in a random attack. The 28-year-old went into the Tokyo Games qualifying tournament in London in mid-March determined that it was to be his moment to shine, but the tournament was postponed after just three days. Now it will require even more patience from the 6-foot-6 boxer who found the sport as an 11-year-old after failing at every other pursuit. "I didn't have an athletic bone in my body, to be honest," he told me. "I'd always been big, so I tried rugby. I then tried boxing one day. It stuck. Before I knew it, it was three, four times a week. Sixteen years later, I'm still here doing it."

He started in the GB Squad 10 years ago. "I was there in the squad before Joyce and Joshua. I'd already fought Joshua in 2009, so I knew him. When he came on the squad, I knew he was going to be a hard load to shift. He was very strong and huge. Looking at the fighters who were at 2012, I don't think I would have done anything."

The night Clarke fought Joshua, in 2009 in his hometown, is a fascinating tale. "He'd had about five fights at the time. I can remember standing on the scales, I'm a little chubby kid and this shadow came behind me," recalled Clarke. "He was like a man chiseled out of stone. He was like a wrestler, massive. Muscles coming out of his eyebrows. He gave me the deadliest look ever. I thought, 'Here we go. It's going to be one of them nights.'

"I got in the ring and I can remember the crowd going mental. They'd never seen me box at home. When Joshua walked out, you could hear a pin drop. Anyway, we had a good fight. A right fight. He won on the old points system. I knew from then on he was going to be a good fighter."

They got on famously afterward on the GB squad. "There is that rivalry, but you build a respect for each other. We were pals. A lot of fighters in other countries struggle to get sparring. I did hundreds of rounds with Joshua and Joyce."

Clarke was caught up in a major incident in his life in 2016, just after he had become a father. "My daughter was two weeks old. We had the traditional 'go out and wet the baby's head'; we went to a nightclub, a local place I'd been in a hundred times before without any trouble." But a fight broke out.

"In the heat of the moment, I was caught in a fight with three or four lads. Outside, after it, my sister's friend saw me and screamed. I can remember looking in a mirror and seeing blood coming out of my neck. I'd been stabbed. Then I realized I'd been stabbed twice in a leg as well. I've lost people close to me to stabbing. I was one of the lucky ones."

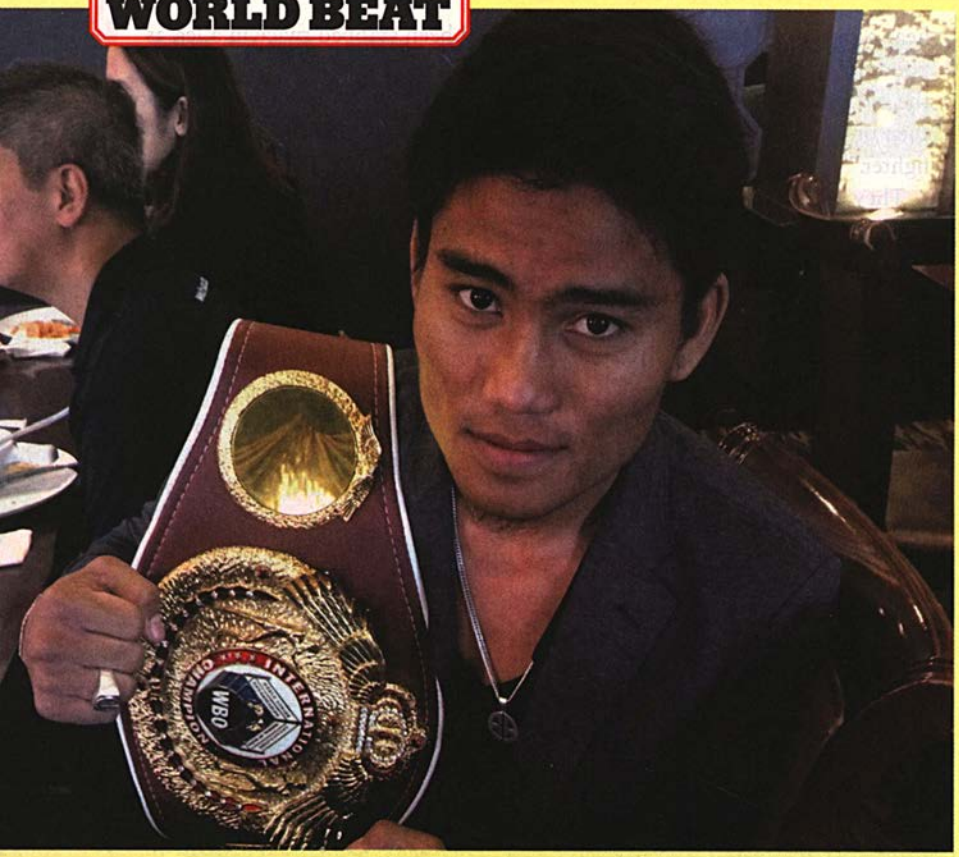
Once Clarke had recovered from the wounds, he returned to boxing even more determined. Getting to the Olympic Games, continuing a modern tradition, would mean so much. "I want to carry on the tradition of the super heavyweights in England. Audley Harrison, David Price, Anthony Joshua, Joe Joyce – all Olympic medalists. I want to be on that list. Hopefully, I can do everyone proud."

★★★

Former titleholder Scott Quigg called time on his career after being defeated by Jono Carroll at the Manchester Arena in early March. The 31-year-old Bury fighter was unable to find timing, rhythm or his opponent with his once-flashing fists. Joe Gallagher, Quigg's trainer, pulled his fighter out after the southpaw

RICHARD HEATHCOTE

Scott Quigg (left) had no answers for Jono Carroll's speed and technique.



Mark Magsayo's first fight under Manny Pacquiao's promotional banner was scuttled by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Irishman dominated in the 11th round, peppering Quigg, who fought like a man chasing a ghost round after round.

"Taking nothing away from him, the better man on the night. From after the fourth round, I just didn't feel like it was there. I was chasing it," said Quigg. "This is a very tough sport, a very dangerous sport, and if it is not there anymore, there is no point hanging around. I gave it my all in camp, I've given it my all in my career, and it's now probably time to leave it."

Quigg was fighting for the first time in 17 months and suffered the third defeat of his 40-fight career, which included winning the WBA "regular" junior featherweight title – one he defended five times before losing on points in a unification contest with Carl Frampton. The other defeat was on a rainy night in Los Angeles after a war with Oscar Valdez, in which he broke his opponent's jaw in a thrilling contest before dropping a 12-round decision. Carroll, meanwhile, all style and tempo in this contest, improved his resume to 18-1-1, his only defeat coming last year when he challenged Tevin Farmer for the IBF junior lightweight title in the United States.

It will always be remembered as an unusual journey to the pinnacle of the sport for Quigg, who decided early in his teens to be a professional athlete, either a boxer or a footballer. He hated being in school, so much so that his parents, Kenny and Lynsay, made an unusual request to his head teacher when Quigg was 14 years old: to expel their son from school.

Gareth A Davies is boxing correspondent for the London Daily Telegraph.

PHILIPPINES

BY RYAN SONGALIA

John Riel Casimero had been waiting his whole life for an opportunity to headline in Las Vegas. He'd had the opportunity to accompany his promoter, Manny Pacquiao, to the ring for his fight against Keith Thurman, and now it'd be his turn.

It wasn't an injury or a scale misfire that postponed his April 25 bout, a title unification fight with Ring champion Naoya Inoue, but the COVID-19 pandemic, which had canceled virtually all boxing shows – and almost every other nonessential event – set to take place in the coming months.

"I'm more afraid of the coronavirus than I am of my opponent," joked Casimero, who holds the WBO bantamweight title, from his training base in Las Vegas. He prefers to look at the bright side. "It's better; I can train more."

Across the Pacific, Jerwin Ancajas was doing his training at an empty park in Metro Manila, despite the ninth defense of his IBF junior bantamweight title, an April 11 bout against Jonathan Rodriguez, being canceled. He was doing his part to limit the spread, wearing face masks when he's outside, washing his hands frequently and limiting his workout sessions to just him and trainer Joven Jimenez.

"For me, I'm used to my fight being postponed," said Ancajas. "Everything happens for a reason, and I'm happy that Top Rank is concerned with us. At least we are all safe."

The ink on Mark Magsayo's new promotional deal with MP Promotions hadn't even dried when the unbeaten featherweight contender was grounded by world events. Instead of flying to Los Angeles on March 15 to begin training with Freddie Roach, Magsayo was practicing his "social distancing" by jogging in place at his home in Pasig City and shadowboxing by himself on the basketball court.

"I don't want to take chances going out," said Magsayo. "The health of the boxers and coaches is

more important."

MP Promotions president Sean Gibbons says it has impacted the schedules of every single boxer in his stable, and even himself. The American matchmaker was in Manila to observe Ancajas' training when Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte ordered a period of "enhanced community quarantine" for the entirety of the Luzon region and ordered all airports to close by Friday, March 20. Gibbons left on Wednesday.

"It's a big impact to these guys, but it's not a lot different than if Marlon Tapales broke his hand and he's out for three months. It's gonna get better," Gibbons said optimistically.

The Games and Amusements Board had ordered on March 11 for all attendees at shows to be screened for fever, but within a week, all fights in the country were shut down. GAB chairman Abraham "Baham" Mitra says some cards had been rescheduled for April, but it was all subject to the movements of an unpredictable virus.

Included in the sidelined cards was the March 16 card headlined by Michael Dasmarinas against Chaiwat Buatkrathok in La Union. Dasmarinas, the IBF No. 1 bantamweight contender, was next in line for a shot at the title currently held by Inoue but now must wait and see what happens next.

"We can't say we are not worried because of the virus, but I hope it goes away soon," said Dasmarinas.

The financial impact can be felt from the promoters down to the fighters.

Jim Claude Manangquil had been scheduled to hold an event on March 21 in General Santos City, headlined by Marlon Tapales, but it was canceled. Manangquil estimates that his show, which cost about $10,000 to promote, lost around $2,000-$3,000, much of it in advances issued to fighters on the card.

"I had one opponent who is getting married in a couple weeks, and his purse was going to be used for the wedding. He doesn't have money for the wedding now, and he can't have the wedding because everything is canceled," said Manangquil.

He has closed the Sanman Gym for the time being, and many of the fighters who live there have gone back to their homes. But some don't have homes of their own to return to, so Manangquil is supporting them, with no fights on the horizon.

Pacquiao, who is best positioned to make a difference as one of the country's 24 senators, partnered with the foundation of entrepreneur Jack Ma to donate 50,000 COVID-19 tests, along with 700,000 surgical masks for medical professionals, to the Philippines.

The virus subsiding is a matter of when, not if, and many of the boxers are finding their own ways to stay sharp and perhaps fight off cabin fever by working out. Casimero is chief among them, prognosticating that his fight's delay is just a short-term inconvenience.

"Many are excited with our fight," he said. "My fans always tell me to knock out Inoue."

SOUTH AFRICA

BY DROEKS MALAN

Besides the upper echelon of South African boxing, which includes IBF flyweight boss Moruti Mthalane, former champions Hekkie Budler, Deejay Kriel and Zolani Tete as well as contenders Kevin Lerena, Thabiso Mchunu, Nkosinathi Joyi and Simpiwe Konkco, there are also some up-and-coming youngsters with 10 fights or less who the boxing world should take note of.

Junior welterweight Jabulani Makhense (right) is part of a new generation of promising up-and-comers from South Africa.

Sivenathi Nontshinga
The red-hot junior flyweight prospect has now taken his record to 9-0 with all his victories coming by way of knockout. An exciting boxer-puncher nicknamed "The Special One," he had to answer a gut-check in his last fight against the much more experienced Filipino Ivan Soriano. Twice stunned by hard uppercuts from his opponent and saddled with a rapidly swelling left eye, Nontshinga displayed the savvy to hold on and clear his head as well as the heart to keep fighting back. In an exciting firefight, he sent Soriano to the canvas with a right in the fourth and ended the fight in fine style, knocking Soriano out for the first time in his career in the fifth round, courtesy of another right.

Nontshinga, who also holds a stoppage win over Siyabonga Siyo (who took Budler and Konkco the distance in competitive losses), has power, speed and heart, and if he continues to develop at the same pace, he could well be a future world champion.

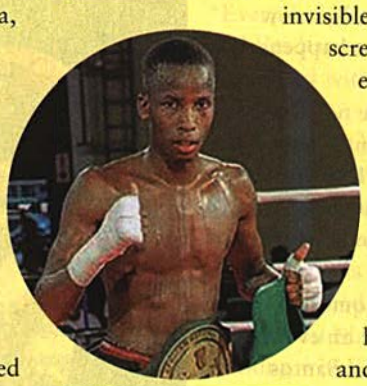
Jabulani Makhense
After a solid amateur career, Makhense is currently 9-0 with four knockouts as a pro. The tall, rangy junior welterweight has so far done everything asked of him and scored three solid wins during 2019, outpointing more experienced opponents in Xolani Mcotheli and Michael Mokoena and then overcoming some adversity over the first half of his fight with a fellow unbeaten prospect, the hard-charging Marios Matamba. Makhense made the adjustments and won a hard-fought decision.

A pure boxer who likes to work behind the jab and utilize the ring, Makhense has been criticized for being a points fighter who doesn't go for the kill. His trainer, former cruiserweight contender Sebastiaan Rothmann, wants to change all that. "We are working on him sitting down on his punches. I want him to hit his opponent with five, six punches at a time and try and get him out of there."

Luyanda Ntwanambi
The 7-0-1 flyweight with four knockouts, nicknamed "Pretty Boy," is another lower-weight fighter who has been in tough. In his last fight, he went through a 12-round war against Fikile Mlonyeni, who threatened to rearrange Ntwanambi's facial features after staggering him in the middle rounds. Taking a shellacking, Ntwanambi seemed to be on the verge of his first loss, but then he did what champions do: He sucked it up and launched a remarkable comeback. He managed to hurt Mlonyeni, take control of the fight and romp home a convincing winner on the cards.

Ntwanambi has a versatile jab as well as an eye-catching inside game, using uppercuts and deft footwork to dazzle the crowds. Time will tell whether he will be following in the footsteps of all the other little big men that South Africa has churned out.

Ayabonga Sonjica
Junior featherweight has been South Africa's most prolific weight division, having spawned titleholders such as Welcome Ncita, Vuyani Bungu, Lehlo Ledwaba, Takalani Ndlovu and Jeffrey Mathebula. Whether Sonjica, also known as "Jay Jay," will follow in those heavy footsteps is ultimately up to him, but so far he has looked the part, scoring a shutout decision over Innocent Mantengu for the South African title in his last fight, bringing his record to 9-0 with seven knockouts.


Ayabonga Sonjica

Sonjica is another rangy boxer who works behind an educated jab and throws an array of power punches with authority to both the head and body.

Abdulaziz Kunert
The 10-0 featherweight, nicknamed "The Arabian Knight," developed a reputation as an exciting volume puncher who can box but also loves a tear-up and is quite willing to take one to land one. A popular fixture on club shows in his native Cape Town, Kunert has steadily improved, tightening up his defense and technique.

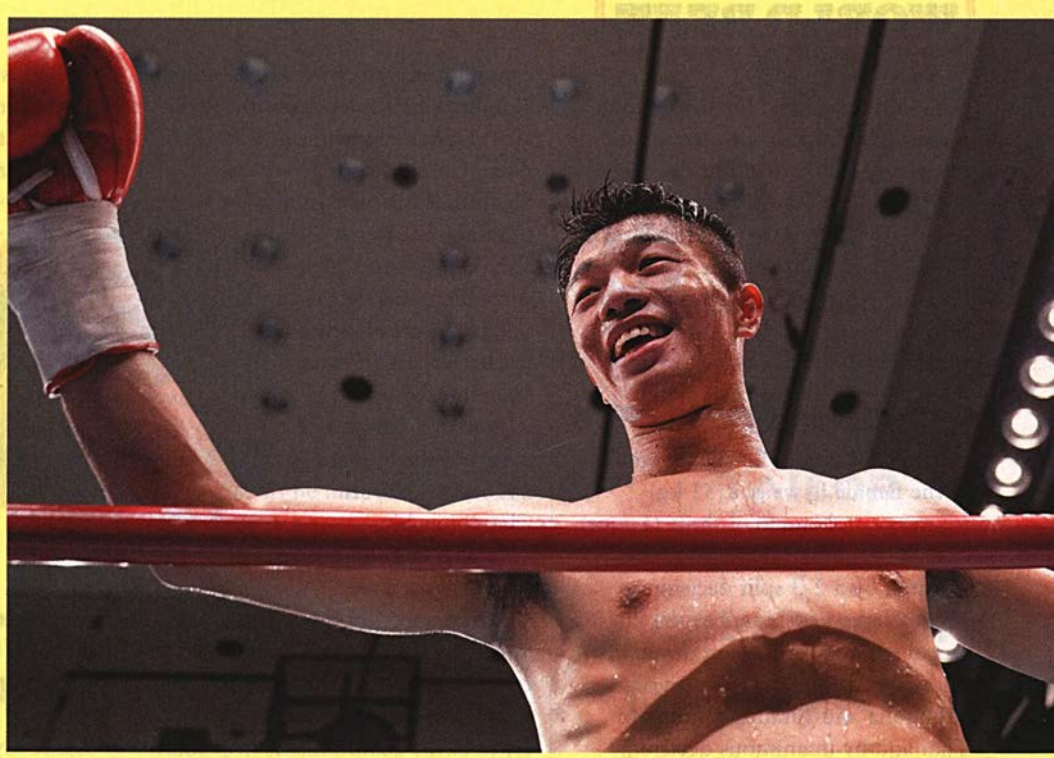
The knockouts were missing, with only one stoppage going into his last fight, but all that changed when he landed a cracking overhand right on his opponent, experienced campaigner Mfusi Maxhayi, in the second round. Maxhayi went down hard, and even though he tried to get up, he couldn't get his legs under him and remained on the canvas.

Kunert was set to face an acid test in fellow undefeated Capetonian prospect Thembani Mbangatha on April 18, but the fight was postponed indefinitely.

JAPAN

BY YURIKO MIYATA

Boxing is fair in the ring. It's one-on-one and visible. Fighting invisible molecules gets people screwed. After COVID-19 emerged in China and canceled Top Rank's February 1 event in Haikou headlined by Jose Ramirez-Viktor Postol, it was not long before the highly contagious and potentially fatal virus reached Japan. On February 26, the Japan Pro Boxing Association and the Japan Boxing Commission announced that all fight cards in March nationwide were canceled or allowed with restriction on public admission.



Junto Nakatani missed out on a title shot in April.

A February 27 event headlined by a 12-round bout for the vacant OPBF welterweight title at Korakuen Hall in Tokyo was carried out without a walk-in audience (opened only for those who bought advance tickets). On March 13, the restriction was extended to April 30, which postponed an April 4 showdown between Ring-rated Junto Nakatani and Geimel Magramo for the WBO flyweight title recently vacated by Kosei Tanaka. When the postponement was officially announced, Nakatani had already been training for two weeks with coach Rudy Hernandez in Los Angeles.

"It does not bother me," Nakatani, a positive-minded 22-year-old, told The Ring. "Now I have extra time to focus on polishing my skills, as I don't need to care about weight that much. I'm having a great camp."

These uncertain and unstable times remind me of the aftermath of the great East Japan Earthquake nine years ago. The magnitude 9.1 earthquake occurred off the northeast coast of Japan's main island and caused a massive tsunami that left more than 20,000 dead or missing and close to 470,000 people homeless. At 2:46 p.m. on Friday, March 11, 2011, the time the quake hit about 200 miles away, it still affected Tokyo's metropolitan area and paralyzed traffic facilities. Korakuen Hall, located on the fifth floor of an old building founded in 1962, was also shaken heavily just about 30 minutes after a weigh-in for a tripleheader of WBC female title bouts. Luckily, the fighters and people had left before the jolt, but the busiest fight venue in the world was suddenly closed for boxing that night. A total of eight cards scheduled there in March were postponed. Meanwhile, the situation in the northern area was devastating, as countless aftershocks and an electricity shortage from the shutdown of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant so distressed people that nobody had an idea of when normal life would return.

After long consideration, Teiken Promotions decided on March 22, 2011, that they would move a huge tripleheader scheduled for April 8 from Tokyo to the safer area of Kobe (with the consent of Humberto Gutierrez, the challenger for then-WBC 130-pound titleholder Takahiro Ao; Mauricio Javier Munoz, the challenger for Toshiaki Nishioka's WBC 122-pound title; and Jhonny Gonzalez, the opponent-to-be of WBC featherweight titleholder Hozumi Hasegawa). All of the original tickets sold were canceled and refunded, and new tickets were released on March 30. The day of April 8, Kobe World Memorial Hall was packed by a sold-out crowd that hungered for boxing. When Korakuen Hall was confirmed safe and reopened on April 1, ring announcers gave the audience evacuation instructions and encouraged donations for victims of the disaster at the beginning of every show. People got used to it being a little darker than usual inside the small venue to save electricity. Those days reminded people to appreciate everything they have and to live a humble life.

★★★

The fights of the 77th Annual Rookies Tournament was scheduled at press time to be held on April 5 with restricted admission (only three family members or friends of each participating fighter). The event was to be streamed officially on YouTube (A-sign.boxing.com) with financing through a viewers funding system. Depending on how it turned out, this show might offer a good example of how to resume some boxing business along with guidelines to avoid spreading the coronavirus.

★★★

The pandemic also impacted the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games,

originally scheduled for the months of July and August but now postponed until sometime in 2021.

Three out of 11 boxing participants from Japan had punched their dream ticket to the Games at the Asia/Oceania regional qualification event held on March 3-11 in Amman, Jordan, which was delayed by two weeks because it was originally located in Wuhan, China.

Tsukimi Namiki finished second in the female flyweight (51 kg) tournament. Namiki, a short (5-foot), quick and mobile southpaw, lost the final by a 2-3 split decision to Yuan Chang of China, but the 2018 world amateur champion defeated both Altantsetseg Lutsaikhan of Mongolia and Jutamas Jitpong of Thailand by unanimous decision. Female featherweight (57 kg) Sena Irie, the quarterfinalist in the 2019 world championship, took second place behind Lin Yu Ting of Taipei. The 19-year-old counterpuncher beat Amy Andrew of New Zealand (5-0), Nesthy Petecio of the Philippines (4-1), and Im Aeji of Korea (5-0). Namiki and Irie are the first Japanese female Olympians-to-be in boxing.

The one who cleared the most hurdles was Sewon Okazawa, a 24-year-old of Ghanaian (father) and Japanese (mother) descent. The athletic southpaw lost a 0-5 decision to Vikas Krishan of India in the quarterfinal of the male welterweight (69 kg) tournament. However, he seized his opportunity in the box-off bracket and beat Wuttichai Masuk of Thailand (4-0) and Maimaititu Ersun Qiong of China (5-0) to snatch the last ticket in the tournament to the Olympics.

Following the results, the Japan Amateur Boxing Federation selected and announced the three male boxers for the host country: middleweight (75 kg) Yuito Moriwaki, who won the first round in the regional qualification event; lightweight (63 kg) Daisuke Narimatsu, who participated in the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro; and 2019 world champion flyweight (52 kg) Ryomei Tanaka, who took part in the 2017 World Championships and 2018 Asian Games (he is the older brother of three-division titleholder Kosei Tanaka). It was surprising that the selection excluded featherweight Hayato Tsutsumi, who won a gold medal in the 2016 World Youth Championships at flyweight and has been regarded as a top prospect for Tokyo 2020, but not controversial, as it was based on objective criteria: the achievements in Jordan and in international competitions over the past three years.

But now it is uncertain if those selections are even conclusive. With Tokyo 2020 officially in the process of being rescheduled, some are arguing that the qualification process should be restarted. Here's hoping that all candidates for the Olympics stay strong and healthy in this difficult time.

Charismatic Quebec-based prospect Lexson Mathieu.

CANADA

BY JAMIE REBNER

If you're reading this, it means you're still alive and Coronavirus 2020 hasn't wiped out everything. Phew! But as of press time, the widespread virus has been dominating us from pillar to post. Our world has been on the receiving end of a beatdown worse than the one that Errol Spence dished out to Mikey Garcia. Schools have closed, hospitals are at overcapacity and people are reluctant to leave their homes. The sporting world has been decimated as well, with the NBA, NHL, NCAA, MLS and countless other professional leagues forced to come to a halt indefinitely.

Boxing, too, has felt its impact with all sanctioned events suspended until at least March 31, according to The Athletic. And that included the card I planned to attend on March 14 at the Montreal Casino. Blue-chip super middleweight prospect Lexson "The Next" Mathieu (8-0, 7 KOs) was going to headline the show, the second in three nights at the same venue for Eye of the Tiger Management (EOTM). On Thursday night, Steven Butler (28-2-1, 24 KOs) aimed to rebound from his devastating knockout loss to Ryota Murata last December in Japan. Butler wanted to show off the work he'd put in with new trainer Mike Moffa, who replaced Renald Boisvert. But COVID-19 forced both of those shows to be canceled at the last minute.

Camille Estephan, head of EOTM, did his best to convince the Quebec commission to keep the fights alive. "I tried to negotiate and said, 'I understand, I know the health of the public is most important, but can't we have these fights without fans?" Estephan told Anson Wainwright for The Ring. "They refused because they were worried about the bodily fluids of the fighters from abroad. So there were no negotiations, they just shut us down. It was a huge disappointment for our fighters. I was impressed because they didn't cry about it, they understand.

"It's definitely over six figures in losses. Some shows you lose money as a promoter, and that's part of the business. But the major cost here is the cost of opportunity. Our fighters didn't fight. We don't have wins; there were titles at stake, titles to be defended. We didn't do any of that. That's really where it hurts. The fighters had camps for two months. Eight guys made weight and didn't fight."

Unlike other major sports leagues, where players' associations protect athletes' salaries in such emergencies, fighters only get paid when they compete. They are now left without an income to support themselves and their families for the indefinite future. I sincerely hope this virus subsides quickly so that life returns to normal, fights resume and the combatants, who sacrifice immensely in preparation for battle, can get back to earning a living and providing for their loved ones.

★★★

EOTM has another colossal prospect, both in stature and in potential, who is rightfully starting to earn attention and praise from the boxing audience beyond Canada. Arslanbek Makhmudov (10-0, 10 KOs), at 6-foot-6 and 260 pounds, is a heavyweight on the rise with legitimate world title aspirations. The Russian behemoth, who fights out of Montreal and is trained by Marc Ramsay, is a stone-cold killer in the ring, reflected by his emotionless demeanor and icy glare. His in-ring persona is pure intimidation, and his aggressive style matches that perfectly. Once the bell rings, he stalks and then unloads his heavy artillery at every opportunity. So far, only one opponent has been able to make it beyond the third round.

Montreal-based Russian heavyweight hopeful Arslanbek Makhmudov.

Makhmudov recently signed a co-promotional deal with Golden Boy, joining stablemates Butler, David Lemieux, Yves Ulysse and Erik Bazinyan, who are all backed by the influential American promoter. That can only mean greater exposure and better opponents for the 30-year-old "Lion," which will help to build him into a deserving title challenger. With the heavyweight division undergoing a renaissance, there are plenty of enticing matchups out there for Makhmudov. And with Golden Boy guiding him, hopefully those matchups come to fruition. Although we have yet to see Arslanbek truly tested, he represents Canada's best shot at staking a claim to the heavyweight championship of the world. Not since Lennox Lewis was at his peak in the early 2000s have we had a dominant Canadian big man. But if Makhmudov keeps dominating as he has, that could very well change.

★★★

On February 21 in Rimouski, Quebec, Erik Bazinyan (25-0, 19 KOs) stayed busy by taking out Finland's Timo Laine (27-13, 11 KOs) in six rounds. It's time for a step up for the undefeated super middleweight. On the undercard, heavyweight Simon Kean (19-1, 18 KOs) quickly dispatched Daniel Martz (19-9-1, 16 KOs) in three rounds. Talented light heavyweight prospect Nurzat Sabirov (11-0, 9 KOs) was taken the eight-round distance by Ricardo Flores (22-8-1, 14 KOs), who had been brutalized by Bektemir Melikuziev in his most recent bout last August.

On February 22 in Brampton, Ontario, Sukhdeep Singh (8-0, 3 KOs) beat veteran journeyman Richard Holmes (19-12, 9 KOs), signaling his first successful venture into the 10-round distance. Brandon "Bad Boy" Cook (22-2, 15 KOs) picked up his second consecutive win in his comeback, stopping Luis Fernando Pina (20-4, 15 KOs) in the seventh round. Rising prospects Mark Smither and Brock Stumpf both moved to 4-0 with their wins on the undercard as well. RING

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In the first defense of his Ring Magazine and WBC lightweight titles, the great Alexis Arguello (right) faced unbeaten contender Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini in Atlantic City on October 3, 1981. Despite a massive edge in championship experience, Arguello was forced to dig deep against the gutsy Youngstown, Ohio, native, but a right-hand knockdown in Round 12 turned the tide irrevocably in his favor. Mancini could not recover, and an accurate combination, punctuated by another fierce right, ended the bout in the 13th. Mancini banked the experience he gained from this fight and, less than eight months later, stopped Art Frias in one round to claim the WBA lightweight title.

SMASHING WALLS, BUILDING BRIDGES

AK AND BARAK ARE BRINGING A FRESH TAKE ON BOXING TO A WIDENING AUDIENCE WITH THEIR CROSS-PLATFORM APPROACH

By **Jason Gonzalez**

Rakim once said, "It ain't where you from, it's where you at."

The legendary rapper's words resonate with Akin "Ak" Reyes and Kamal Barak Bess, radio personalities who hardcore boxing fans simply know as Ak and Barak. Within just a few years, the Brooklyn natives have become two of the more prominent and influential members of the boxing media as co-hosts to "The Ak and Barak Show" on SiriusXM Radio Fight Nation (Ch. 156).

When away from the radio studio, Ak and Barak express their talents on camera with "The Sweet Scientists" and "Da Pull Up," popular programs streamed on DAZN.

How did they go from relative unknowns in the boxing business to hosting a daily radio show and two TV programs? It started with friendship and a mutual obsession for hip-hop and boxing.

Ak and Barak first crossed paths on a basketball court in Park Slope (Brooklyn) 25 years ago, and it was obvious that they had much more in common than just partaking in casual pick-up games at the park. They were passionate fans of hip-hop, fashion and boxing, and they enjoyed engaging others in their heated debates on the sweet science.

In the early 1990s, word of mouth was society's version of social media. In the hood, Ak and Barak were commonly known to initiate discussions and debates with fellow fight fans at frequented neighborhood landmarks, such as barbershops and the bodega. Ak was the first to use his gift for gab behind a mic.

"About 10 years ago, I started hosting a hip-hop radio show on a small internet station for free," Ak recalled. "It was a weekly show, and with that platform, I started to talk about boxing with my co-host, Saleem 'Hitchcock' Thomas. This would eventually open the doors for us in the world of boxing journalism. I then started to do work for WorldStarHipHop.com. We sent them videos and interviews that we conducted with fighters. This ultimately created bigger opportunities from a professional standpoint as well."

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In 2015, Ak and Barak were offered a show called "The Hype Men" on the SiriusXM Rush channel (which focuses on combat sports). In what would be the duo's first national radio platform, their job description included pre- and post-fight coverage at some of the biggest boxing events around the country. Ak and Barak also addressed the hottest topics in pop culture.

By the fall of 2016, while still employed at SiriusXM Radio, Ak and Barak were hired by Thisis50.com, the website/video platform owned by music mogul and actor Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson. Their show "The Sweet Scientists" was born.

On it, Ak and Barak both review and discuss everything that is happening in the world of boxing. They also engage in two-on-one interviews with some of the biggest names in the sport. Two years after its inception, "The Sweet Scientists" was picked up by DAZN, a smart move by the new streaming platform given the wide appeal of the show as well as a bold advance for Ak and Barak, but it was also a risky move for the co-hosts given the fractured nature of the boxing industry.

DAZN made its U.S. debut with an exclusive multi-year deal with British promoter Eddie Hearn, who manages unified heavyweight titleholder Anthony Joshua and a large international stable of fighters. In late 2018, DAZN signed Canelo Alvarez to a record-breaking exclusive contract and did a multi-year deal with the Mexican star's promoter, Golden Boy. Former middleweight champ Gennadiy Golovkin would also join DAZN in early 2019.

All essential moves by DAZN, but the often adversarial nature of boxing threatened to keep the stars of other promotional companies and networks off of "The Sweet Scientists" now that it was part of the upstart streaming platform's programming. Ak and Barak would not accept the political divide.

"Barak and myself, through our relationships with fighters, promoters and publicists, have torn down the wall that once existed between DAZN and everyone else, including ESPN and Al Haymon – particularly Al Haymon fighters," said Ak. "It was taboo for anybody to be on DAZN. Everybody wanted to stay away from it, but we kept chopping and chopping and chopping away through relationships – like (Barak) with (Shawn) Porter, me with other fighters on PBC and Top Rank – until we got (Vasiliy) Lomachenko on. He was the first Top Rank guy on our show. We have also had the likes of Tyson Fury, Danny Garcia, Gary Russell Jr. and Shakur Stevenson as guests on the show as well."

"There is a cold war between the networks," Barak added. "But if there is a cold war, for some reason, the only way these fighters have infiltrated DAZN is through Ak and Barak."

Ak and Barak have not only torn down the walls between rival boxing promoters and networks, they've also built a bridge between DAZN and

"The Ak and Barak Show" airs weekdays on SiriusXM Fight Nation.

Danny Garcia enjoys himself in the studio with Ak and Barak.

SiriusXM.

"Although the paperwork may reflect that our arrangement is strictly a deal with DAZN, we are still working under the auspices of SiriusXM Radio," Barak said. "Initially it wasn't easy. However, both entities eventually were on the same accord when they happily reached an agreement. But there was so much more to this iconic merger between SiriusXM Radio. This partnership is truly one of a kind. SiriusXM Radio and DAZN took a chance on Ak and Barak because they knew that we were the only ones that could carry a daily show of this magnitude. Ak and Barak incorporate both culture and lifestyle."

Ak and Barak's fashion sense combined with their ability to engage boxers and entertainers in truthful and sincere dialogue is what separates them from other on-camera talents and print journalists. The studio ambiance of "The Sweet Scientists" often has guests feeling that they are at a family member's cookout. How else can you explain the wrestling match that took place between Terence Crawford and Ak at the studio?

"Da Pull Up" is a stark contrast to the conventional Q&A session. In a Candid Camera-type of prank, Ak and Barak target an internet troll who has disrespected a fighter and then pull up with that fighter in tow to startle the troll in a public setting.

"Da Pull Up" is distinct in the sense that it's real people and not actors. The show has been very successful and has since gone viral.

With the launching of "The Ak and Barak Show," which debuted on SiriusXM in November and airs weekdays from noon-3:00 p.m. ET, boxing fans are presented with the option of listening over the airwaves or watching the simulcast on DAZN at a later time. This formula is reminiscent of the Howard Stern blueprint, which was perfectly executed when the "shock jock" worked at 92.3 FM. Stern's morning radio show was filmed and then televised later on the E! channel. Ak and Barak could reach a wider audience by following the model.

These 'microphone fiends' have come a long way, but the expedition doesn't end here. If there is a lesson to be learned from the duo, it is that following your passion and remaining true to your values eventually leads to success.

You can follow Ak and Barak on Instagram @boxingwithak and @boxingbully.

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